fantastic

SCIENCE-FICTION

OCTOBER

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A ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLICATION

SCAVENGERS OF SPACE

By CLEE GARSON

ALL NEW: FINEST FICTION OF FUTURE FRONTIERS!

By PAUL FAIRMAN • RON BUTLER • LEE GRANT • and others

THEY WRITE...

RON BUTLER

I was surprised when Howard Browne called to tell me he wanted a few lines of autobiography for his readers, because I'm comparatively new at the science-fiction game. When I decided to write, though, it was only natural that I turned to the type of stories you see in HB's two magazines, because my whole life has been one of science and outdoor adventure.

Actually, your editor was lucky to find me in at my New York hotel. I spend little enough time in the U.S.A. and even less in New York. By profession I'm a petroleum engineer and in the past half dozen years I've been all over the Middle East for as many oil companies. I'm the guy who precedes the drills and derricks with the 20th century scientific equivalent of a dowsing stick into potentially oil-rich land.

I love the life because it always keeps you on the move and I wouldn't be happy any other way. I guess it's got so I feel confined and hemmed in otherwise.

In between dowsing jobs, I've knocked around most of the Middle Eastern cities, with my favorite haunts being Beirut, Lebanon and Jidda, which is the Saudi Arabian port of entry for mysterious Mecca. I'm well over six feet tall and big enough to take care of myself in the trouble a lone American is bound to find in those places.

The rest of the statistics go like this: thirty-one years old, unmarried, left-handed and bi-lingual (English and Arabic).

I've always been restless. I don't even type my stories sitting down. Hemingway, I think, has the same trouble. This restlessness is the chief reason I like science-fiction: fast-moving science-fiction is the only kind of reading which always keeps you on the move mentally. I think I can turn out a good yarn with a Near Eastern setting and I'd like to try. But *Ma'alesh*, as the Arabs say.

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Editorial and Executive Offices
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

President
B. G. DAVIS

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Editor
HOWARD BROWNE

Art Editor
HERBERT ROGOFF

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• A few months ago your editors put some pretty sweeping changes into effect in the appearance and content of *Fantastic*. Stories of straight fantasy were largely eliminated and straight science-fiction substituted, cover subject matter became of a scientific nature, the words "science fiction" appeared under the title of the magazine, interior artwork was tightened up to replace the loose, "arty" kind of drawing we had been using. Both an editor's column and a lengthy readers' department were added, and the entire package presented to the public for approval.

The result: Sales began to climb like a WAC Corporal! To be exact, something like seventeen percent within the space of two issues! It was enough—more than enough!—to indicate that the new policy had won instant and hearty approval, and that from now on all we had to do to wax fat and prosperous was just continue along the same path.

So—we're changing everything!

Now wait a minute! This is no time to throw anything at us! It won't be a permanent change—unless you want it to be. It's merely in the nature of an experiment, an idea, an attempt to make *Fantastic* an even more exciting publication—one totally unlike any other on the stands. You see, it has to be done; for in this business you don't rest on your laurels—unless the laurels are in the shape of a funeral wreath.

Okay?

Let us explain what this change is to be. To begin with, it starts with the next (December) issue, on sale September 8th.

The following issue (February, 1956) will be pretty much the same as those before the change was made. You see, we want to find out how you've reacted to the type of story presented in that December issue. If you take to it in overwhelming numbers, if your letters indicate that you want more fiction in the same vein—then we plan to make the change a permanent one.

Now, what kind of stories are we going to run, you ask. That's kind of hard to answer in a few words. Maybe you'd understand if we pointed out that we're all Walter Mittys at heart (Mitty, immortal character invented by James Thurber, was a mild-mannered little man who found release from a humdrum life by day-dreaming himself into incredible and exciting adventures); that all of us have such secret thoughts now and then as, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could see through solid matter?" or "Boy, if I could only eavesdrop on what people are thinking!" or "What would it be like if every desirable woman I met fell in love with me?"

See what we're getting at?

Fantasy? Sure, but not the kind of fantasy you usually encounter. For in these stories the hero is YOU! *You* are going to walk through that stone wall; *you* are going to "hear" what your girl friend is thinking; *you* are going to be the one a thousand women will fall desperately in love with!

You might as well know that getting this kind of fiction wasn't easy. Since no editor was in the market for such material, none of it was being written. So we sent out word through the usual channels and presently manuscripts began to trickle in.

Not one of them was what we had in mind at all! The writers simply didn't understand what we were aiming at. So we called in the boys we can count on—Fairman, Toland, Thames, Lesser, etc.—and talked things over. We worked out plots with them, gave them pep talks and sent them to their typewriters—and the problem was solved. They hit the target right on the nose—and we think you're going to be in for some of the most satisfying reading of your life!

That's it, folks. Make a point to pick up the December issue, read it through—and give us your frank opinion. A postcard will do—although a letter would be even more welcome. But we'll need your help . . . and you've never let us down yet!—HB

SCAVENGERS OF SPACE

By CLEE GARSON

When the lovely daughter of Earth's richest man became a kidnaper's victim, nobody thought of hunting for her in a garbage dump. Nobody that is, except a guy named Johnny Hayden—and his sole interest was the coffin that held her body!

THE handsome young man riding beside the girl in the chauffeured limousine appeared casual enough. He had to. It was important to appear casual. But under the pose, his nerves were tight, there was perspiration on the palms of his hands, and a nerve under his left ear was ticking sharply.

That damned nerve always ticked when the pressure was on. He cursed it silently, smiled at the girl, and said, "This is the place, Pat."

As the car came to a halt, the girl frowned at the ugly, gray building. "What an ugly heap." It stood between a hun-

The savage blow knocked him away from the coffin.

dred-story aluminum tower that gleamed like a great silver finger, and a huge marble plaza hanging from a graceful metal arc that served both as a support and an eight-lane flying highway for high-speed cars.

"Ugly—yes," the young man said. "After all, it was built back in 2110. But it's a landmark, darling. It has a heritage. Probably the finest museum in the world."

"But who wants to waste an afternoon creeping around in a musty old museum?"

The young man was able to look a trifle hurt. "Had an idea you'd enjoy it, darling. Something a little different. A change from the cocktail-and-dance routine."

The girl noted his injured air and softened somewhat. "Oh, all right. I wouldn't want to disappoint you. But let's make it fast. I'm sure the place must be haunted."

They went up the ancient stone stairs and through an antique revolving door. Inside, stood an old man who looked as though he'd probably come with the place. He wore a peculiar blue uniform, the like of which the girl had never seen before. "What's he got up for?" she whispered to the young man.

He smiled. "That's the uniform of an Eighteenth-Century policeman. All the attendants wear them here. Adds to the authenticity. Give you the feeling that you're stepping right back into the past."

"Mad. Real crazy."

"Uh-huh. And by the way—did you know that expression isn't new at all. The kids were using it way back in the Twentieth Century."

"You thrill me, sweet. What is that thing?"

"Don't you recognize it? A machine for washing clothes."

"I should recognize it? I never washed clothes in my life."

"That's because your daddy has several hundred million dollars. But as a matter of fact, clothes still get washed."

They moved down the long corridor, past the grotesquely uniformed attendants, and the young man's tension came close to the surface. His blanket of casual amusement held at the seams, but his movements were a trifle jerky as he glanced at his watch and turned his face away from the girl to frown toward one of the intersecting corridors. Had the timing gone wrong? Had the guide picked this particular day to go off schedule?

At that moment there came the sound of shuffling feet and

the 2:30 guided tour swung into the main corridor and approached the couple.

The young man's frown vanished. He turned to the girl. "Let's wait 'til that mob goes by. It's better to follow them than to have them stepping on our heels."

The girl shrugged, then pointed and said, "Did people actually *ride* in that thing?"

"Certainly. And they were pretty proud of it, too. It was called a Chalmers. One of the first cars ever built."

"Amazing!"

The tour had moved on. The young man glanced at his watch and his tension increased. "Let's follow them. The guide evidently knows where he's going. Not too close, though."

They turned into a cross corridor behind the group. They followed slowly. As the last of the guided sightseers moved out through the far exit, two men in the queer old uniforms entered. The young man glanced up, saw them, and immediately took the girl's arm. "Look at that, darling," he said, pointing. "Any idea what that is?"

"Not the faintest."

"Guess."

"Some kind of a chest."

"A casket. A Nineteenth-Century burial box. They put people—bodies that is—in boxes like that and—"

One of the two approaching men nodded sharply. The young man took a white cloth from his pocket, squeezed a bulb hidden inside, and whipped the cloth over the girl's face. Her eyes had only a brief instant to widen in surprise. Then they closed; her body went limp into the waiting arms of the young man.

"Hurry up!" one of the uniformed men snapped.

The other man had already lifted the lid of the casket. The young man laid the unconscious girl inside, closed the lid, turned and asked, "Where's the duplicate?"

"Outside by the service entrance. We'll take her out and bring it back."

"You were supposed to bring it in with you!"

"Couldn't take a chance of getting caught with two caskets when there's only supposed to be one in existence. We'll put her in the car and bring the other one back."

"That's risky."

"Take it easy. Don't get rattled. Everything will be all right."

The two men picked the casket up at either end and made a leisurely exit. The young man watched them go.

He breathed deeply, seeking to calm himself. He adjusted his hat, put a casual expression on his face, and looked with excellently faked interest at what was purported to be the oldest video set in existence. What an antique! he told himself; and forced his mind to ponder on it; forced the casual amusement into his mind as well as his manner.

The two men with the priceless casket approached the service entrance. No one was about. At this time of day no one was ever about. They went through the door, stopped, stood in flat-footed consternation. The alley was deserted.

"Where in hell's the car?"

"How do I know?"

"God damn it! The car was supposed to be here!"

The taller of the men looked up and down the alley. "Don't lose your head. It's just been delayed."

"We'll be caught with our pants—"

"Shut up! We're not going to go to pieces. It's just a delay, I tell you. We'll exchange caskets and get the duplicate back where it belongs. By that time the car will be there."

"But—"

"Come on! Do as I tell you!"

They crossed the alley to the refuse pile, threw back a torn, discarded blanket revealing a second casket. They exchanged it for the original, which they covered carefully, and then went back through the service entrance with the duplicate.

Five minutes later, they returned. To stand again completely dumbfounded; so befuddled that the smaller of the two turned to look at the service entrance, thinking they'd come out the wrong way. "It's—it's gone!"

"But how—"

"It's all gone! The whole damned garbage dump!"

"But how could it—?"

The previous speaker turned savagely on his companion. "The garbage truck came along, you fool! It scooped the whole pile up and went right on!"

"Hell! What are we going to do?"

"Do? I'm getting out of here. The Chief will kill us."

"It wasn't our fault! We didn't know the damned garbage truck was coming."

"He doesn't take alibis!"

"What about Mack, in the car? It was his fault for not being here."

The tall man had already started down the alley. "Let Mack take care of himself. I'm looking out for me."

The other caught up with him. "Where you going?"

"To the space station. Out of the system. I want to stay alive."

"Me too!"

The newscaster's voice was vibrant with the importance of what he had to say: "Patricia Holiday, daughter of Neal Holiday, the billionaire industrialist, vanished unexplainably this afternoon. Miss Holiday had visited the Wayland Museum in the company of a friend, Lane Davis. Mr. Davis said that he and Miss Holiday were browsing among the exhibits when a guided tour passed by. He himself became occupied with an item of interest and when he looked up, Miss Holiday was gone.

"Mr. Davis said he was not alarmed, thinking the girl had gone on ahead with the group, and that he would meet her at the entrance to the museum. But when Miss Holiday was found not to be with the group, a search was made. This came to nothing, however. Miss Holiday had vanished.

"The girl's father, when interviewed, said he was certain of foul play, since only while she was in the museum was his daughter unguarded, as she is accompanied continuously by competent detectives. But when she entered the museum, they felt it was not necessary to follow, and waited outside.

"Holiday's surmise may be correct, but it is difficult to understand how the girl could have been abducted from the confines of the museum if such was the case. The museum is well-staffed with attendants of unimpeachable character and there is no record of a disturbance of any kind.

"It is hoped that Miss Holiday wandered away and will soon be located."

Half a system away from the dignified corridors of the Wayland Museum, Johnny Hayden opened his eyes, yawned, and got out of bed. He yawned again, scratched his big chest luxuriously, and walked to one of the windows of his pressurized cabin. It was a nice day outside; a condition that never varied. It was always day and it was always nice. In all his twenty-five years, Johnny had never seen a cloud, had never felt a drop of rain; had never known the faintest breath of wind.

Outside, in the clear blue of eternal sunlight, Johnny saw what he had always seen—the weaving, bobbing procession

of asteroids that went to make up his world. They ranged from nubbins the size of a man's fist, to lumps of rock a quarter of a mile thick. On many of the larger ones were the small, pressurized cabins similar to Johnny's, in which his friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens of the cluster were born and lived and eventually died.

Johnny's asteroid, claimed originally by his great-great grandfather's grandfather was a highly desirable one, in that it had a flat surface; room for a cabin, an iron-hard front yard, and an artificially magnetized storage area.

Other asteroids were not so ideally shaped. Most of them were globular and jagged, causing the tenants to conduct themselves pretty much like mountain goats. Many had no storage surface at all, so that salvage prizes of any size had to be strung on cables and hauled along behind.

After looking things over, Johnny dressed, had what was probably considered breakfast, donned his pressure suit and went outside. He snapped the power into his magnetic boot plates in order to keep from being floated out into space, and moved clumsily toward the mounted telescope in his front yard. He mounted the seat behind the eye-piece and began scanning the void.

It was dismally empty. This annoyed Johnny. Three periods now, and no load. Had the dump been abandoned? That was impossible. Four planets had used this dump for the past three hundred years. It wasn't even half filled yet. Of course the dump had not been abandoned, but the thought came to Johnny every time he scanned the void. Just as it had come to his ancestors before him.

He continued scanning. A few minutes later, he spotted the load. And none too soon, it had been located, simultaneously, by fifty other scavs who, exactly as Johnny, were diving out of their telescope seats, adjusting their jet units, and kiting off into space.

Johnny threw his unit into high speed and noted that both Sam Kaley and Knute Jenkins were ahead of him. Damn it all! Why hadn't he been a little quicker with the spotting? Sam Kaley was ahead as usual. Sam always got there first and snapped up the best salvage.

He forgot about his competition and concentrated on the load. It was in sight now, a big one. His heart quickened

with the thrill of anticipation —the quick elation he had felt a thousand times before, but which never became commonplace: the thrill that made this the best business a man could be in, the finest possible life a man could live. Maybe —today—he would hit the jackpot! Like Bill Nevins, who found a million dollars' worth of platinum in a gunny sack stowed in the bottom drawer of an old dresser! Or Michelson, who discovered a set of perfect counterfeiting plates and gave them to the cops on Mars for a big reward. Things like that of course, were the stuff of dreams. They happened once in a lifetime. Few men had that kind of luck, but it didn't really matter, because there was always a living around the dump heap. Johnny wouldn't have traded his flat-sided asteroid for—well, for all the money on Terra.

Johnny arced in alongside the load a few scant seconds behind Sam Kaley. His eyes raced over the bobbing, floating mass of debris. He knew Kaley's eyes were just as busy. It was this first few seconds that sometimes made for success or failure.

There was the usual collection of smashed-up stuff nobody wanted. That was natural. Otherwise it wouldn't have been here. Johnny spotted a rusty old trunk. It could be cleaned up and revarnished. There was a buck in it. He slapped his claim sticker on it, a round white plaster lettered with his name, and turned his eyes elsewhere. He noted that Kaley was drifting forward, that gave him an exclusive on the whole rear end of the load for possibly another few minutes.

He claimed an old aluminum desk with a badly bent leg; an apparently unopened packing crate; four tire casings that might stand retreading; the rusted motor of a rocket car.

Then he stopped, reared back on his jet, and stared. Here was something new. A velvet box with handles. He had never seen anything like that before. Did it have any value? The handles looked to be silver, but Johnny's practised eye told him they were only base metal gilded over. The thing was valueless, probably, but Johnny slapped a claim check on it anyhow; might be something inside. Then he veered away and dived after a small suitcase without a handle, like a bulb-headed fish going after a minnow.

Twenty minutes later, the load was alive with ants in

space suits weaving busily in and out attaching claim checks. Twenty minutes of this, and the load was picked clean.

Satisfied with his haul, Johnny put his claim checks away and began the business of transfer. He unwound fifty feet of light chain from around his waist and jetted to the front end of the load, and began working backwards, hooking his takes at intervals along the chain.

Twenty minutes later, he'd assembled his whole take in a long, bobbing, ungainly string —all except the odd, velvet box. There was no room on the chain for this, which meant an extra trip. Johnny frowned, looking around speculatively among the industrious scavs. He spoke into his microphone. "Hey — Kaley. Sam Kaley. Do me a favor?"

Nearby, a pressure-suited figure straightened up from hooking a huge aluminum door frame on his chain. "What's eating you, Hayden?"

"I've got a claim check on that funny cloth box there. Haul it in for me, will you? You're stuff's all big. You've got room."

There was no particular cordiality between the two scavs—their relationship was based on rivalry—and Johnny expected Kaley to refuse. In fact, the request had been more in the nature of a jibe. He had wanted Kaley to notice the greater volume of the Hayden load. But Kaley, in a good mood because of the excellence of his takes, said, "All right, but it's got to be paid back. You got to remember and haul for me sometime."

"Sure—sure. I'll pick the box up at your rock." Johnny took a firm grip on the end of his chain and applied power to his jet unit. The load, several dead-weight tons by any planetary standard, straightened out and floated gently along behind him. He moved along, careful to keep a taut chain, the only danger being that the take would catch up with him and rip his suit on some sharp point.

Back at his rock, he orbited, slowing the take down by continuous circling until he could lower the whole thing gently into his yard. When it was anchored tight to the artificial gravity pull, he dropped the chain and looked the take over with satisfaction. When the salvage ship came by this time, he'd make a nice lump—a nice lump indeed.

Far away on Terra, high in a lush penthouse apartment,

the Chief sat scowling behind his desk. He was a big man, filled with vital, undefinable power; and when he scowled, the cruelty in him was highlighted.

Four men stood in front of the desk. The two who had lately worn the grotesque cop's uniforms, looked small and inoffensive now, in civilian clothes. The third, a weasel-faced little youth who could drive a car with the best of them, bit his lip nervously and wished the Chief's expression would soften.

The fourth, a handsome young man who had used the name of Lane Davis and boned for a week on the treasures of the Wayland Museum, had a less servile appearance than the rest. Nevertheless he, too, listened respectfully to what the Chief was saying:

"I lay out a job. I use my brains to make you men rich, and what happens? You mess it all up. A foolproof plan and you mess it up. What have you got to say? You, Givens! Speak up!"

The weasel-faced youth dropped his eyes. "It—it could have happened to anybody, Chief. It wasn't my fault. The stupe ahead of me popped his motor right at the corner where I was supposed to turn into the alley. Another car pulled up beside him and I couldn't get by."

"You should have taken such possibilities into consideration."

"How did I know the damned garbage lift would come up the ramp just then?"

"It certainly moves on a schedule. You should have known exactly when it was due!"

"I think you're being a little hard on him," the handsome young man said.

The Chief swung his huge head around, the scowl deepening. "Listen, Purdy! You'd better keep your damned mouth shut until—"

"Take it easy," Purdy replied. "You're not talking to any two-bit roustabout. I was going to say that the plan failed because of your shortcomings. Allowance for traffic tie-ups and the arrival of the garbage truck should have been made in your master plan. You're supposed to be the brains. The boys only follow orders."

The Chief's face darkened, and Purdy wondered exactly what kind of mental sickness made him the slob he was. Some ego-distortion coupled with homicidal tendencies, no doubt.

The Chief jerked open a desk drawer. His hand went

inside. Purdy said. "Leave that gun alone. You wouldn't live to use it." He raised the small metal tube he'd taken from his own pocket. "I could melt your blubber down to a handful of cinders before you could get it out of the drawer."

Purdy was surprised at his own recklessness. Nobody talked to the Chief this way—and lived very long. But Purdy had been disgusted at seeing months of carefully planned work go for nothing. He'd arranged to meet the girl; had wormed into her confidence; had even made love to her. Now the deal was blown sky-high and the Chief was to blame.

The Chief's face was maniacal now. Purdy wondered if he'd take a chance on pulling the gun anyhow. You could never tell about crazy people. Purdy said, "Seems to me the thing to do is figure out the next step—save the deal."

The words snapped the Chief's intensity. "You're an idiot. How can it be saved now?"

"Why can't we demand the ransom anyhow? Neal Holiday doesn't know the girl's gone. He'd pay."

"He would *not* pay. You know that yourself. He isn't the kind to hand out money and hope for the goods. The only way he'd kick in is a straight exchange. The girl for the money."

Purdy toyed with the heat tube, very much afraid that the Chief was right. Tough nut, Holiday. And there was another angle. Double-cross him and ten systems wouldn't be big enough to find safety in. Hand over the girl in exchange for the ransom and Holiday would probably let it go at that. He loved money too much to spend three or four more million running them down. No, Neal Holiday wasn't the kind to fool around with.

Purdy said, "Well, there are two possibilities. We can drop the whole thing and forget it, or we can find the girl."

The weasel-faced Givens said, "*Find* her? Where in the hell—?"

"It's pretty obvious where she is. To me, anyhow, because I took the trouble to do a little checking. Those garbage trucks go to the city dump about twenty miles out."

"Then all we have to do is—"

"Uh-uh. I already tried that while you four were running around in circles flipping your fingers. At the dump, the trucks load directly into a

space scow. It so happened that our truck was the last one in. The final load of the week. As soon as its load was transferred, the scow rocketed. It's heading for the big refuse heaps now — somewhere out in the asteroids."

"Well, that makes it final. We couldn't give Holiday a dead body."

"Of course not, but I think it's worth finding out whether the girl is dead. She left the museum in what's practically suspended animation. She may be dead and she may not. That stuff we used is the latest. It's been tried on animals and they were frozen afterwards and still came out of it. I say it's worth giving a chance."

The Chief pondered darkly. "All right. Why don't you go and find out?"

"I'd be glad to. It would cost a little money, though."

"How much?"

"I'd need ten thousand."

"What for?"

Purdy shrugged. "Maybe I wouldn't use it all." He pointed the heat tube at the Chief. "Look—you've already got fifty thousand tied up in this deal. Do you want to kiss it good-bye, or throw out a little more with the idea of saving it?"

The Chief's face worked. He studied Purdy. "I'll go for five," he said.

Purdy shrugged. "All right. I'll do my best and report back as soon as I find out anything."

Johnny Hayden finished checking his take. He'd looked over the pieces, estimated the necessary repair work on each, and had moved some of them into the shop next to his storage area. He was about to go to work when he remembered the cloth box Sam Kaley had agreed to haul in for him. He looked out across the asteroid community toward Kaley's rock. Sam wouldn't bring the box over, of course. Johnny debated for a moment. Then he put on his helmet, left the shop, and pushed off into space. Might as well pick the thing up and get it over with. Maybe there was something in the box. Percentages said there should be, because the packing case and the trunks he'd brought in had been empty. A man usually found something concealed in every load.

He dropped down on Kaley's rock and looked with some envy on the load Kaley had brought in. The cloth box was not there. Nor was Kaley. Must have gone back for a second load, Johnny thought.

But he'd been sure Kaley's take had hardly filled one chain. He shrugged. Might as well wait inside. He walked to the door of Kaley's shack and turned the knob.

It was locked.

Johnny dropped his hand in surprise. This was unheard of! Nobody in a scav community ever locked a door. In fact, very few scav doors had locks on them. Nobody ever stole anything. And if they did, where could they go?

Johnny tried the knob again. It held. He doubled his fist and pounded on the panel. Nothing happened. Kaley wasn't there. Johnny was about to turn away when he saw the knob move. The door opened a crack. One of Sam Kaley's eyes appeared.

Sam had his helmet on and could have been coming or going. Or could have been doing neither as the door of course, gave into an air lock.

Johnny said, "I've come over for my box, Sam. What's the idea of a lock on the door?"

Kaley stared at him. There was something strange in his face. He said, "What box?"

Johnny frowned. "Cut it out! The box you said you'd haul in for me."

"I—I didn't get it."

"Well, of all the—"

Kaley's face worked. "I—I—yes, I got it. You'd find out anyway."

Johnny was frankly puzzled. "Sam—are you all right? You look kind of funny."

"Come on in."

As Johnny entered, Kaley looked out over his shoulder as though expecting to be invaded by an alien horde. He closed the door and locked it. He turned the valve that pressurized the air lock from the oxygen machine under the shack and while they waited, Johnny said, "What's this all about? This secrecy?"

Kaley licked his thin lips. "That box, Johnny—there was something in it!"

"What?"

The dial registered *safe* and the two men removed their helmets. Now they could speak directly rather than through the phones. Kaley said, "The damndest thing!" His eyes sparkled. "Something for both of us, Johnny. We won't tell anybody. We'll just keep—"

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

Kaley beckoned. "Come on."

Johnny followed him into the shack. The place boasted a single room and in the center of this room sat the dark cloth box. The lid was in place.

Kaley stepped over and lifted it.

Johnny's eyes popped. "Good Lord!"

Kaley grinned. "That is what I said. Yes, sir, that's just what I said when I saw her."

"A girl!"

"And what a girl!"

Johnny moved closer and bent over. He laid his hand on the still face. "She's dead."

"No, she isn't. Put your ear down and you can hear her heart. It's beating very faintly."

"Then she's almost dead."

"No, she isn't. She's in some kind of suspended animation. She'll come around all right. A drug of some kind. I've read about those drugs. Immunity to deep temperatures and to vacuum."

"How can we bring her around?"

Kaley grinned. "We just wait 'til oxygen takes effect. Then—"

Johnny looked down at the girl. Then he looked at Kaley. He studied the man's expression, read it reluctantly, then looked back at the unconscious figure. She was beautifully formed. The breasts—not moving—were high, the dress lay close, revealing the lush outlines of ripening womanhood. He looked back at Kaley. "Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?"

Kaley's grin deepened. "Sure, Johnny. When do two guys like us ever get a chance like this? A woman thrown right into our laps."

"We'll keep her here, huh?"

"That's right. Who'll know? Keep her as long as we want to. Amuse ourselves. Have fun like two guys never had before."

"Then—when we're tired of her?"

"That won't be for a long time, but when we are, we'll have to protect ourselves of course. We can haul her way out beyond the dump and point her toward Aries and give her a shove."

Johnny appeared to be thinking it over. He took a slow step toward Kaley. Then he swung from the heels and his fist splatted against Kaley's jaw. Kaley went down like an ox.

Johnny stood looking at him, rubbing the numb knuckles of his right fist. "I just wanted to be sure," he said. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't made you lay it out, one word after another. I'd never have believed a guy could be so rotten."

He turned back to the casket and stood rubbing his chin thoughtfully. He said, "You

think you can hold out for another short ride, lady? Just across to my place?" He laid his ear to the finely moulded breast. "I guess you can."

He put the lid back on the casket and hauled the whole thing into the air lock. When he returned for his helmet, Kaley was sitting up. Kaley said, "You son-of-a—"

"Hold it, mister. It might be just enough to make me kill you. Better be careful."

"You aren't getting away with this."

"You've got that backwards. You're in trouble yourself. I'll get a few of the boys together and tell them—"

"You'll keep your mouth shut."

"Maybe I will—maybe I won't. It depends on how you act from here out."

Johnny put on his helmet and went into the air lock. As he turned to close the door, he saw Kaley's face work; saw the lips move. But Kaley was without a helmet so Johnny could not hear what he said. In fact, he didn't care what a rat like Kaley would say.

He opened the outer door and pulled the casket out onto open rock. He attached his chain to it, then lifted it and pushed hard to release it from the artificial gravity. It floated up into space. Johnny jetted himself loose from Kaley's rock and hauled the casket across void to his own.

The captain of the salvage ship scratched his beard and said, "Dunno. It's hard to figure. Never took no passengers before."

The handsome Purdy smiled engagingly. "But there are no regulations against it?"

"No, guess there ain't. Why anybody'd want to spend a month on a salvage ship is beyond me."

"Let's just say that I'm bored with conventional recreation and want to do something different."

The captain shrugged. "You're the boss—that is if you've got a thousand dollars."

"That I have. When do we start?"

"I'm leaving for a swing around the junk yards day after tomorrow. Be here at six in the morning with not more than ten pounds of gear. That's your weight allowance."

"I'll be here."

After Purdy left, the captain looked at the battered hulk of the *Santa Maria*. She was an old ship; one that had weathered many a meteorite storm. Not much for appearance, but powered by a good

sturdy engine that still had plenty of orbits. "Getting pretty high-toned, ain't you?" the captain said. "Carrying passengers now."

Johnny Hayden lifted the body of the girl from the casket and placed her gently upon his bed. He laid his ear against her breast. The heart seemed stronger now. He debated crossing to other rocks and bringing help. A couple of the scavs had wives. Maybe—but no, why should they know any more than he did?

He brought a bottle of brandy, poured a spoonful and forced it between the girl's lips. He thought it brought a little color into her cheeks.

Then he saw the shapely breast begin to rise and fall; slowly at first—hardly perceptible. But as he watched, the breathing became deeper and more even. He listened again. The heart was beating solidly, steadily. "You're going to pull out of it all right," he said.

He pulled back the covers of the bed and put them over her. He patted down the pillow, and she looked like any other girl would look—warm-cheeked—long-lashed. Or at least she looked as Johnny dreamed a girl should.

Feeling there was nothing more he could do, he turned reluctantly away and went through the tunnel into the shop. The salvage ship would be along soon and he'd have to have some pieces ready.

He looked over what he'd claimed and put a trunk on the bench. It was in fine condition. It needed only a refinishing job and a coat of varnish to look like new. He put a sander into the socket of his flexible arm and turned on the power. In a few minutes, the trunk was down to bare metal. He used the air hose and then brought a jug of sealer to the bench and began shaking it.

"Hello."

Johnny spun around, almost dropping the jug. "Hel—hello."

She stood there quietly, as though nothing out of the way had happened at all. Her color had returned and her eyes were bright with interest. "What are you doing?"

"I'm—I'm repairing this trunk."

"Oh, you're a trunk repairman."

"Well, yes—no—yes. I'm—"

"What's your name?"

"Johnny — J o h n n y Hayden." He knew he was blushing, and he cursed his self-consciousness. It was inexcus-

able. Just because she was a girl and he hadn't seen a girl for so long, he was acting like an idiot. But being aware of it and doing something about it were two different things.

"Hello, Johnny." She was smiling, completely at ease.

"Tell me, what's—what's your name?"

Her lips opened. Then her eyes grew quizzical. "That's funny. I don't know. I certainly have one but—"

"You don't remember it?"

"No."

Probably her calmness was a phenomenon of the particular drug to which she had so recently been subjected, Johnny thought. He knew drugs worked differently on different people. A straight amnesia case, he was sure, would be more frightened, more confused. "Do you know where you came from?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"And yet you're not a bit afraid?"

"What is there to be afraid of?"

"Nothing, really. Let's go in the house. I'll make a cup of coffee."

". . . and so that's all I know about it," Johnny was saying. "I claimed that cloth box there and you were in it."

"I was drugged, you say?"

"Of course. You had to be in order to survive deep space without a pressure suit. Haven't you the least recollection of how you got into the box?"

She shook her head and the lights glinted on her hair. "Not in the least, but you know—it's funny."

"What's funny?"

"That box. I seem to know what it is."

"I've never seen anything like it before."

"Neither have I, but I know it's a casket."

"What's a casket?"

"A box the ancients buried people in."

"Good Lord. You don't think that you were buried on some planet that broke up and let you float free do you?"

"It hardly sounds possible. I just know it's a casket but I don't know how I got in it." She looked at Johnny for a moment, then said, "Another odd thing—I'm not in the least upset about not knowing who I am or how I got here. Tell me—what place is this?"

"We're near one of the planetary dumps. I'm a scav. All the men who live on this asteroid group are scavs."

"And what do scavs do?"

"We salvage out of every load they dump here. The big garbage scows haul refuse here from three planets. We

claim likely looking stuff, repair it, and then when the salvage scow comes, we trade with old Jake Kelly for supplies."

The girl got up and walked to the window. Her long legs, pushed against her skirt, brought strange feelings to Johnny—irritating, yet pleasant. She said, "This must be a wonderful life."

"It is. Just about the only way a man would want to live. Out here we're free souls. We can come and go as we please. I never lived on a planet, but my father told me about them before he died. It must be awful to be rooted down in soil."

The girl turned to look at him. "I must have lived on a planet because all this seems completely new to me—and fascinating."

"I'll go to a planet some time, of course. When I'm too old to work. Then I'll build a big house and live in style."

"Build a house? With what? That takes money."

"I've got money," Johnny said. "Almost a hundred thousand dollars. On every load we sell to Jake, we take eighty percent in supplies and twenty percent in cash. Before I quit I'll have another hundred thousand. A couple of the scavs out here have a million already."

She turned suddenly and came close to him and took his hands. "Johnny—can I stay here with you?"

"Stay here! Good Lord, do you realize—"

"Please let me. I—I guess I don't really want to find out who I am. Somehow it scares me. Something must have happened that—"

"But this is no life for a girl. A couple of the men have wives but—"

"You mean you'd have to marry me if I—"

"No. Things are not the same here as on the planets. We aren't under their laws. We're free souls. We do what we want to."

"Then let me stay. I'll cook for you and work—"

He felt no less disturbed by her presence, but definitely more in control of himself. "I said I wouldn't *have* to marry you," he replied quietly, "but I didn't say I'd let you stay here without doing it."

"Then marry me—please."

He shook his head. "Let's not rush into anything—for your own good. How could you know whether you love me or not?"

"I—"

"I have a feeling that you're terrorized by something you can't remember—that wanting to get married and stay

here is only an instinctive means of seeking protection."

Her eyes pleaded. "But you won't send me away!"

"Not for a while—not until you remember who you are and have a place to go."

Captain Kelly's *Santa Maria* circled the largest asteroid in the group and came in for a landing beside the big pavillion. This was the communal rock upon which none lived; where all meetings were held and all trading done.

From all directions, the scavs were streaming in with chains of repaired junk to be used in trading. The pavillion was an open platform and it was soon crowded with suited scavs and what appeared to be brand new merchandise. Captain Kelly walked in a slow circle, moving from scav to scav, looking over each pile of claims.

In order to hold the exclusive, unwritten franchise on the dump, he was required to take everything offered, not just the pieces that struck his fancy. But bargaining was permitted.

Kelly looked over the first lot, sour-visaged as he peered through his helmet. "Forty dollars."

The scav clawed at his chest as though his heart had faltered. "That's robbery! You're nothing but a legal thief! The rocket motor alone is worth more than that!"

Kelly bent over. "The tubes are badly cleaned, but I'm a generous man. Forty-five—and I'll lose money."

"Fifty—and I'm giving it away!"

"Forty-seven fifty. That's the limit."

The scav nodded and smiled. Kelly gave him nine-fifty in cash and a voucher for the balance. The scav pocketed the money and headed for the merchandise deck of the *Santa Maria* where he would exchange the voucher for goods.

Kelly went on down the line inspecting, haggling, buying.

While he worked, Purdy moved in seeming aimlessness among the colorful crowd. He was in low spirits because things had not gone well. He'd visited two previous dumps with Steele and had drawn a blank at both. On one, he had not seen a single female; on the other, three weather-beaten old crones who could hardly be called women.

The really disturbing thing was that he had had to leave each dump without being certain that Patricia Holiday was not there. The scavs, he'd found, were a clannish lot,

close-mouthed, suspicious of outsiders. He had not been able to search beyond the trading pavillions of either dump.

And even searching the pavillions was a job. All the pressure-suited figures looked exactly alike. The job entailed roaming about among the scavs and peering into each helmet for a female face.

He now went about this monotonous business; helmet after helmet: dirty faces, dirty beards, suspicious eyes. Then, a sudden surge of elation. Pay dirt! One helmet containing the hair, the eyes, the flawless complexion of a beautiful girl.

Pat Holiday!

Her eyes came up to meet those of Purdy. They stared blankly. Purdy stared back in surprise. No recognition in the eyes. Pat obviously regarded him as a stranger. He reached out and took her by the hand. "Pat! Pat! Don't you remember me?"

He remained unrecognized, but she drew back in fear. This angered him. With only contempt for the scavs, he gave them scarcely a thought. He'd found the girl and he was taking her back. Nothing would stand in the way.

But something stood very much in the way. A hard hand against his chest sent him backwards. "What's wrong with you? Leave that girl alone!"

Rage flared in Purdy's face. Contemptible scav! He should be killed for laying a hand on a Terran. Purdy straightened and pulled the utility knife that rested in the scabbard of his suit.

This, he speedily discovered, was a mistake. Instantly, it seemed, there were a half-dozen knives poised at various vulnerable spots on his suit. One thrust and his air would jet forth and he would be dead before he could be gotten out of the suit and into a pressurized room. Fear swept the color from his face. These damned scavs! They stuck together like a pack of dogs. He offered a sickly smile.

"What's going on here?" It was Captain Kelly's voice, authoritative, commanding.

"This guy doesn't know how to keep his hands off women!" Johnny Hayden said. His knife had been the first to come out.

Kelly scowled at Purdy. "What are you trying to do? Get yourself killed?"

"I—I—it was a mistake. I thought I knew the girl."

"Get back to the ship and stay there until we're loaded. You can't be trusted outside."

Kelly pointed Purdy in the right direction and gave him a shove. The scavs watched silently as he walked away. Then the trading went on.

Half an hour later, Purdy heard a knock on the door of his cabin. He opened it to find a scav wearing a suit and carrying a helmet under his arm. "They told me I'd find you here," the scav said.

"What do you want?"

"My name's Johnny Hayden. I saw you at the pavillion."

Purdy remembered Johnny's knife. He backed away, looking for a weapon.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Johnny said. "I'm just curious. You said you thought you knew the girl back there. Well —did you or didn't you?"

Purdy thought swiftly, trying to size Johnny up. "Don't you know her?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't. I found her body in a funny-looking box out on the dump. She should have been dead but she wasn't. I revived her, but she's lost her memory; doesn't know who she is or where she came from. I thought you might give me a lead."

Purdy's mind raced. In spots like this, he was at his best and, sizing up the situation accurately, he came up with a full-blown plan for getting her back to Terra without a fight or trouble of any kind. A foolproof plan.

Purdy relaxed and smiled. "First," he said, "I want to apologize for acting as I did. You misinterpreted my actions but I don't blame you. I was motivated by sheer surprise at seeing the girl so far from Terra."

"You *do* know her, then."

"Don't you get the news out here?" Purdy asked cautiously.

"No. We don't care much what goes on among the planets."

"The girl's name is—Patricia Hillman. Her father is Lewis Hillman and the girl wandered away from home a couple of months ago."

Johnny eyed Purdy levelly for several moments. He didn't like the man—didn't trust him. He felt, however, that Purdy was telling the truth. "Have you any proof of that? If you have I'll of course let the girl go back with you on the salvage scow."

That didn't suit Purdy's plans at all. Captain Kelly was no fool. Purdy smiled, trying to register sincerity. "I can understand your suspicions—your fears. In your place I'd feel the same way, so I tell

you what we'll do. I'll send a message back to Hillman, telling him where his daughter is. He'll come immediately, of course, and there will no doubt be a few dollars in it for you."

"I don't want any money," Johnny said. He studied Purdy. The man appeared to be honest. Excitable, evidently, but it seemed he'd meant Pat no harm. "Her father must be plenty worried."

"Is she staying with you?"

"Yes. It will be a little crowded, but I'll have room for you until her father comes."

"Oh, no. Wouldn't think of putting you to inconvenience. I'll make out somehow."

Purdy's refusal to accept Johnny's invitation made sense. It was going to be a touchy proposition — getting the girl away. And if her memory came back, Purdy's whole projected plan would fall through. Nothing would bring this about quicker, he thought, than the presence of a familiar face, someone she'd known. He had to stay completely away from her.

He sat down and coded a message to the Chief. He'd hardly finished when there was a rap on his door. "It's unlocked. Come in."

The door opened and a swarthy, bearded scav entered. The scav wasted no words. "My name's Kaley."

"So?"

"You were after that girl at the pavillion."

"I'm afraid you misinterpreted—"

"I didn't misinterpret anything."

Purdy hesitated. He didn't think there was any law out here, but this might be some local vigilante. "How do my actions concern you?" he asked politely.

"They don't, except that if you're after the girl, I could help you. I'm a little on the debit side with Johnny Hayden."

"Is that so?"

"I had the girl first. He took her away from me. Now I have a plan—"

"I have my own plans," Purdy said, sharply. "But you can help me."

"What do I get out of it?"

"You'll get even with Johnny Hayden."

Kaley considered this, then asked, "What do I have to do?"

"Nothing much. I need a place to stay until my friends come from Terra."

"You can stay on my rock."

"Fine."

After Kaley left, Purdy

made a mental note that here was another one to be eliminated. He showed entirely too much interest in the girl. He'd be useful, though, until the time came.

Purdy went on with his planning. This was the opportunity for his big move. He thought of the Chief and his mouth twisted contemptuously. He wondered how much of the Chief's thick midriff was muscle and how much was tallow.

Back on Terra, a messenger handed the Chief a letter marked: *From West Sector Asteroids via Salvage Ship Santa Maria.* He decoded it and read swiftly. The note finished with:

—so charter a ship and get out here as fast as you can. Dress Givens up as a doctor and bring him along. Remember that your name is Hillman. I've given you your background; bring plenty of identification to prove it.

Purdy.

The Chief's reactions were mixed. He was happy at the way things had worked out but he did not like the tone of the note. Purdy laying out the plan. Purdy giving orders. Perhaps Purdy needed to be reminded who was boss.

The Chief scowled and picked up the directory. He ran through it, looking for the number of a ship charter agency.

The Chief paced the narrow confines of Kaley's cabin. He paused at the window to look out at Pavillion Rock where his chartered ship was moored. He scowled. "Weirdest place I ever heard of. When we moored, all those idiots flocked around and threatened to mob us."

Kaley said, "They thought you were cutting in the other salvage ship. It's a kind of concession. Unwritten agreement. So long as they're treated fairly, they stick with one man."

"Had a devil of a time convincing them we were only visitors."

Purdy laughed and the Chief whirled on him. "It was your fault! Why weren't you there waiting? Any time a subordinate gets out of line in my organization—"

"Did you say *your* organization?"

The Chief's face darkened. "Why, you—"

Purdy smiled. He had deliberately baited the Chief. This was the payoff. "You're quick on the uptake, but you always did have a sharp mind.

After all, you had to have *something.*"

"You seem to be looking for trouble," the Chief said ominously.

Purdy was completely at ease. He studied the big man thoughtfully. "I think your power lay chiefly in those little mannerisms—the way you can look at a person— stare him down."

The Chief's hand moved toward his coat pocket. Purdy noted the gesture. He took three long steps and hit the Chief in the belly.

The Chief's face turned a sickly gray as the huge girth of his waist proved soft and pliable. Purdy's fist went in deep. The Chief sagged to his knees, gagging.

Purdy reached down and took the gun from his pocket. He turned to Givens. "Which side are you on, shrimp? It's time to stand up and be counted."

Givens studied the situation, licking his thin lips. "What have you got to offer?"

"No money—no ransom. Nothing but your life."

"I don't get you."

Purdy looked down at the groveling Chief. "One punch," he muttered. "Big, tough leader. I should have taken over long ago."

"I said—I don't get you."

Purdy motioned toward the Chief. "This stupid ass had us all slated for extermination. His analysis of Neal Holiday was based on greed and was completely erroneous. He was right on one point: if we'd have had the girl, we could have made a quick deal and gotten away clean. But it's too late for a deal. All we do now is save our own skins."

"And how do we do that?"

"By getting the girl out of here and killing her—annihilating her completely."

Givens was interested. "You think her father is on our trail now?"

"He's scouring every planet."

"Then—"

"But I don't think it would occur to anybody to come out here to the planetary dumps. It's too far from civilization and they'd have no reason to —if we plug one loophole."

"What's that?"

"The girl knows me. She knows this place. So if she's out of the way, they'd never untangle the thing in a thousand years. See what I mean?"

Givens wasn't the fastest brain in the galaxy by any means. He pondered the situation. "I—I think I do—"

"There's nothing — not a single clue to connect us with

this garbage dump except the girl, get it? They don't get any news out here. The one link—that salvage ship captain—would have no reason to connect this place with the kidnaping. So it comes back to the girl again. If she's gone, they hit a gap in the trail they can never bridge—"

The Chief had been getting quietly to his feet. He lunged forward. His bulk brought Purdy to the floor. His big hands clawed for Purdy's throat.

Purdy twisted away and came out from under. He straightened, turned and aimed a kick. It caught the Chief in the groin. The man squalled, threw out a hand to catch Purdy's ankle, missed, took another kick in the vulnerable midsection.

Purdy smiled and kicked again. He seemed gratified at the agony he was causing. He kicked again and again, moving around the big, helpless man, selecting his targets with care.

He kicked the Chief at the base of the spine and said, "I don't dare mark you. We're going to need you in getting the girl away. Otherwise, it would be a pleasure to cripple you permanently."

Kaley stood in one corner, subdued by Purdy's actions. He realized that here was a man to be handled carefully. He was impressed by the pleasure Purdy got out of his work.

Purdy stopped torturing the big man and said, "Now get up and behave yourself. You're going to do just what I tell you and you're going to do it right. I wouldn't relish going to the annihilation chamber because of your greed and stupidity."

Johnny Hayden looked out his window at the ship moored on Pavillion Rock. He was quite uneasy, puzzled, and he searched his mind for a reason. Because Purdy had taken up with Kaley? After all, the man had to stay somewhere. He couldn't sit in the open pavillion waiting for Hillman.

But his uneasiness did not diminish. Was it because of a doubt in his mind about the whole affair? Or was it because of his reluctance to lose Pat?

He turned to where she sat sewing the leg back onto a doll she'd found in one of the crates claimed from the last load. "Your father's here," Johnny said. "He's come to get you."

She looked up vaguely, "My father?"

"Yes. Don't you remember?

Doesn't the name *Hillman* mean anything to you?"

She shook her head. "Not a thing."

"But you're not sure that it's *not* your name?"

"No—I'm not sure that it isn't."

"When this man comes, are you willing to go away with him?"

She smiled trustingly. "If you're convinced that he's my father, Johnny. I certainly *had* a father."

Johnny sighed.

"I'll be sorry to leave, though. It's been nice here."

"You don't want to leave?"

She got up and walked to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "No, I don't, but I want to be sensible. I know I had a past and it's—it's frightening not to remember. I'll go with my father, but when the doctors and psychiatrists straighten me out—then I'll be back, Johnny."

"When you're straightened out, you'll probably forget me—or at least, you'll wonder how you could have ever been contented riding a rock beside some lousy planetary garbage dump."

She moved a little closer, her face near his. "Dear Johnny. You're a fool, my darling. You want to kiss me—hold me—but you'd cut off an arm before you'd take advantage of a helpless girl."

He had changed a lot since picking up the cloth box at Kaley's rock. The sense of complete freedom he'd known and loved seemed less desirable somehow. It was a great life, but damned lonesome when you got right down to it. He ached to reach out and draw her close.

"—not even," she was whispering, "when a girl wants to be taken advantage of."

The hell with ethics! he thought, and reached out hungrily. But before his lips touched hers, a bell sounded. He drew back. "That's the air lock door," he said. "They've come."

The Chief was living with a new emotion. Fear. He had never contended with it before. His scowl, his overbearing manner, his all-around dangerous appearance, had always kept him in the dominating position. So this was something new: the terror that Purdy had shot squarely into his heart. Purdy was now boss.

And the Chief found that fear was an excellent goad to perfection. Under its shadow, he was doing a fine job of acting out the father. He went straight to Pat and took her

in his arms. She neither resisted nor cooperated.

Purdy noted with satisfaction that the amnesia still held. If the girl suddenly regained her memory, the situation would become highly dangerous. As it was, things were working out.

He stepped forward and said, "Mr. Hillman, perhaps Doctor Abbot had better look your daughter over and make sure she'd be able to travel. I'm sure you want to get her back to Terra as soon as possible."

"I certainly do," the Chief rumbled. "Doctor, will you be so good?" Deep down inside, the Chief was trembling. Maybe if he carried this off well, Purdy would forget some of his animosity. He must leave no doubt in the younger man's mind that he was willing to accept a subordinate position.

Givens came forward, almost overacting the part. "She appears to be all right physically," he said, "but I'd like to ask her a few questions —check the extent of the amnesia. Could we go into the other room?"

Purdy frowned. The sooner they were out of this rat's nest, the better. He wanted to tell Givens to hurry up. This damned scavenger might not be as stupid as he seemed. Never underestimate an enemy.

"By all means," the Chief said. "If Mr. Hayden will accommodate us."

Johnny was startled by the words. "Why, yes—yes, of course. That door leads to the bedroom." He had been deep in his own thoughts. The uneasiness still dominated his mind. He had been looking at the men, trying to analyze them. Their credentials had been authentic. Hillman certainly looked the successful industrialist. And he'd insisted upon presenting credentials for both himself and the homely little doctor. Maybe that was it. Would an anxious father remember such things in advance?

Johnny wished that Pat had exhibited just a spark of recognition, or some show of hostility. He had been attuning his own actions to hers. She had been entirely negative, but what right had he to expect any other reaction?

Again, he attributed his uneasiness to his own personal feelings toward Pat; his reluctance to see her go. These people were obviously genuine.

Purdy felt his nerves tightening now that he was on the

edge of success, just as they had tightened back in the museum. But, even with the objective almost certain, he still thought about alternatives. It could still go wrong. What if the scav balked? It had been a star-crossed project from the first and it could go wrong again.

If it did, he would have to kill the three of them right here. The girl, Hayden, and Kaley. They all knew too much. That would be bad, though. These scavs would raise hell and he'd leave a mile-wide trail getting away. The original plan was the only safe one. Get them out into space. Annihilate them in a jet tube. Then there would be no way he could ever be traced. He'd be clear. Then he would wait a while, set up a new organization and pull another project. And with a brain at the helm, it would be a success.

He was pondering the wisdom of annihilating the Chief, when Givens led the girl out of the bedroom. "I suggest we get started immediately," he said. "I'd like her memory to come back under controlled conditions in a Terran hospital."

Purdy's eyes narrowed upon Givens. Why didn't he get on with it? Had the stupid little rat forgotten his lines?

Givens caught the look. He went on, "Mr. Hayden—there is a great favor you could do for Pat. And I'm sure her father would be very grateful."

"I'll do anything I can," Johnny said.

"Would you return to Terra with us?"

"Return to Terra? Why, I've never—"

"You see, so far as Pat is concerned, we are all strangers to her. She does not even know her own father. But she's grown used to you. Yours is a familiar face, and I think it would help if she had you beside her on the trip back."

Johnny considered it while Purdy watched tensely. This was a focal point. The scav had to go with them. He couldn't be left here to possibly contact the Terran police later on. Possibly he wouldn't, but then again, he might. Purdy intended to take no chances.

Johnny was silent for several moments. Then he said, "Certainly I'll go."

"Good man!" The Chief said heartily. "You won't regret it, I promise you."

The blast-off had been uneventful and the asteroids

were now far behind. Johnny sat with Pat in the lounge, his feelings mixed. He was just beginning to realize how narrow his world had been; how little he knew of people and planets. He realized what a strange place Terra must be.

Pat suddenly squeezed his hand. "Johnny—"

He turned his eyes to her. "Yes?"

"I—I think I remember. I think—that man—"

"What man?"

"Mr. Purdy. He—"

"But you never saw him before he came to the rock."

"It seems I did. There was a place filled with—with very old things—" She stopped and thought for a moment.

"Johnny, what was Mr. Purdy doing in the asteroids? Why did he come there?"

"Why, he was working on the salvage ship, I guess. I never thought to ask him." What *had* Purdy been doing in the asteroids? Why would a man of his apparent caliber go wandering off Terra to the garbage dumps? "He probably had a reason, but if it will make your mind easier, I'll ask your father about him."

"Where is my father? I haven't seen him for a good many hours."

"Neither have I." That was strange, also. It seemed to Johnny that a father would be interested enough in his mentally disturbed daughter to at least inquire about her once in awhile. "Maybe the doctor wants you to be by yourself."

She smiled. "You're with me."

"He'd have a hard time keeping me away."

"Let's go find Mr. Hillman —my father. I think I'd like to talk to him."

"I don't see why we shouldn't, but are you sure you want me to go with—?"

A scream from upship cut off his words. It came faintly, but to penetrate the lounge at all it had to be high and shrill at its source.

Johnny was on his feet. "Something's wrong. You stay here."

"I want to go with you."

"No! Let me find out first."

"Johnny! I won't stay here alone!"

"All right. Come along."

They went into the companionway and moved quickly forward. The passage was empty. On ahead, the door to the control cabin was open. Another high-pitched scream, cut off abruptly by the sound of a slamming metal door.

Johnny looked in. A voice said, "We've been waiting for

you two. Come on in. This is the payoff. The masquerade is over."

Purdy's voice.

Purdy stood near the bulge made by the right jet tube along the far wall. He had just closed the small cleaning door and was dusting off his hands.

Johnny said, "What happened? Who screamed?"

"Your friend Kaley."

Johnny looked around. Givens stood by the control panel holding a small, silver heat tube. The eye of the tube was centered on Johnny. Givens said, "Don't move, scav. You and the girl stand still. I might snap this thing."

Johnny said, "What do you mean—Kaley? He's back on his rock by the dump."

"Oh, no. Poor Kaley let his thirst for vengeance dim his good judgment. He wanted to get even with you and I promised him the chance. We smuggled him aboard."

"*Smuggled* him? Why?"

"He had to be gotten rid of. Just as you and the girl have to be gotten rid of. As I said, the masquerade is over."

Johnny took a step forward. Givens waved the heat tube. "Stand where you are!"

Pat's eyes were on Purdy. There was a dawning of recollection in her face. "Lane! Lane Davis! I remember now. The museum—" Her face turned deathly pale. Her eyes closed. She slumped to the floor.

Purdy looked on casually as Johnny knelt beside her. "Better that way," Purdy said. "Merciful. I'm glad we don't have to hurt her."

"Hurt her! What are you talking about?"

"You both go to the same place Kaley went. Into the jet tube."

Givens said, "Maybe he doesn't understand. He's never been on a ship before."

"Perhaps not. It's very simple, Hayden. We turn off one of the tubes. We bind you and put you into it through the cleaning door. Then we turn it on and in less than ten seconds, you're nothing but a little ash clinging to the spark screen at the far end. A quick and merciful death, really."

"That's what you did to Kaley?"

"And you're next. Or possibly we should put the girl in before she wakes up."

"It would be the humane thing to do," the man now revealed to Johnny as Lane Davis said, casually. "I've no objection to being merciful."

Johnny crouched over Pat's still body, "Why, you dirty, rotten—"

He got no further. At that moment it was as though the floor of the cabin had been jerked backward from under all of them. Johnny, down on his knees fared better than the rest. He smashed into the forward bulkhead with his shoulder and was even able to protect Pat from injury.

Givens pitched forward, dropped the tube, and was knocked unconscious as his head hit steel.

Lane Davis hit the wall full force and had the breath knocked from his body. He lay on the floor, writhing and gasping. When he got oxygen back in his lungs, he turned to survey the situation. He found it bad.

Johnny was down on one knee pointing the silver tube squarely at his chest. "Don't move," Johnny said.

Lane smiled. "Now listen, old man. This can be straightened out. Just a joke. Kaley is—" He took an easy step forward. He was going to tell Johnny it had all been a joke; tell him that because he couldn't think of anything else to say on the spur of the moment. A lie or two, he thought, would get him close enough to grab the gun. The stupid scav's reactions were probably pretty slow.

But right in the middle of the lie, he stopped and looked down at his right hand. It was gone. Only a charred stump remained. Johnny said, "I told you not to move, Lane."

Lane's eyes widened and he went to his knees, squalling like a stricken animal. He babbled, "Good God, man! You can't do—this is inhuman! You can't burn a man's hand off and—"

"Then just stay where you are."

While Lane crouched there gibbering from the shock, Johnny got up and went to the port. The sight that greeted him would have been impressive even to one not personally involved. To Johnny, it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Several hundred scavs, each with a line and a magnet block. The blocks had been set against the hull of the ship in many places and the hundreds of small jet units of the scavs had functioned in unison—as one great motor, to pull the ship to a stop. Countless Lilliputians hauling a giant to a standstill at the ends of hundreds of tiny lines . . .

The scavs hauled the ship back to the dump and anchored it to the community rock before any attempt was made to enter it. Then an attempt

wasn't necessary. Johnny opened the port to find that Pat's father had finally tracked her down, arriving at the dump a scant half hour after the charter ship had blasted off.

When the scavs heard the story, they did the rest.

There was so much activity then, with doctors, specialists, and the Space Authority taking over, that Johnny was able to fade back out of the picture. He did this from choice after seeing who Pat's father was—what a gap existed between their stations—how foolish any idea of romance was. He retired to his rock and stayed indoors, waiting for the big Holiday ship to blast off for Terra.

But before this occurred, the bell told Johnny his air lock was occupied. He opened it to admit a huge, suited figure. The helmet was removed and a deep, commanding voice announced, "I'm Holiday."

"What can I do for you?"

"Why have you deserted my daughter?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I understand she lived here with you."

Johnny reddened. "If you're implying that—"

"I'm not implying anything. I'm just saying that any man who lives alone with my daughter on a rock with no one else near enough to hear her holler, is going to marry her or deal with me!"

"That's absurd! I'm a scav. She's—"

"Not good enough for you, eh?"

"I didn't say that. I—"

"Well, you'd better not. Now get your suit on and let's get going. She won't leave this hell hole without you."

"You mean she actually—?"

"That's right; and another thing: do you know how I got my start in life, young man?"

"No. How?"

"As a junk dealer. Back on Terra. I did pretty good at it, too."

Johnny grinned. "I'll bet you did, at that," he said.

THE END

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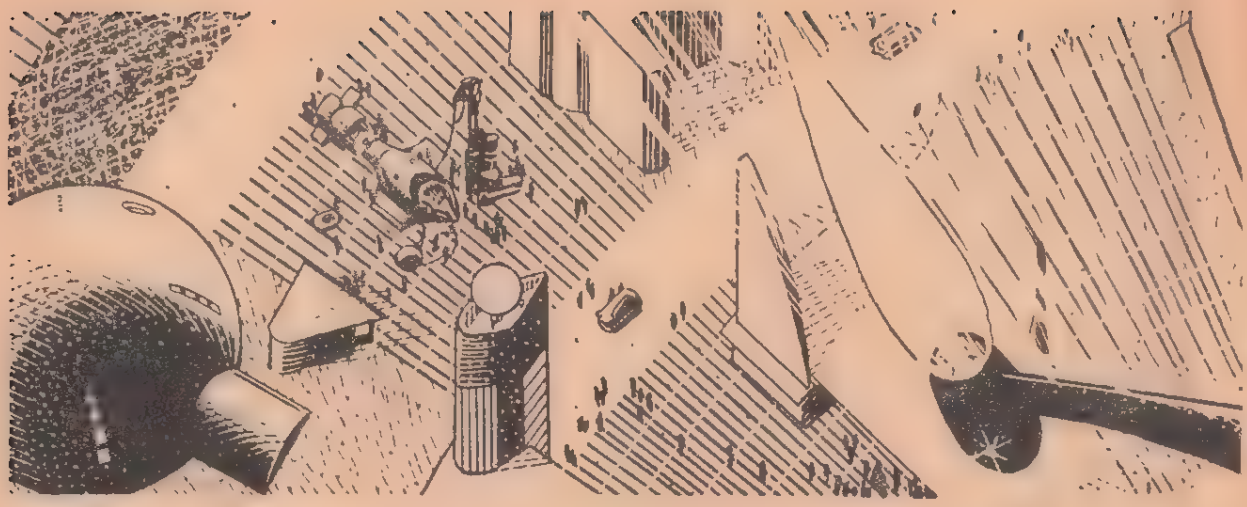


Signal THIRTY-THREE

By LEE GRANT

The Golden Comet, on its initial run from Ganymede, was destined to crash while attempting to land at the Station. Not only would this kill every person aboard, it would make for bad public relations—a result highly displeasing to Trans Planetary officials. So they called in Ed Loder, of the Station Police, and ordered him to force countless tons of hurtling metal into defying the laws of gravity!

"TRANS Planetary twenty-two!" the loudspeaker voice blared through the intricate network of the space station, through the passenger lounges and bars, through the repair wells and over the ticket desks and reservation booths, from a thousand loudspeakers covering every point of the Station.

Trans Planetary twenty-two. Just a number. But not any number. The code number meant nothing to the passengers waiting to ship out or to the hundreds who had ferried up from Earth to meet their friends on the arriving interplanetary liners.

Out of control, the spaceship screeched earthward!

It meant a lot to the station police. For twenty-two was the riot signal.

Ed Loder tossed his five cards face down on the table in the police station ready room, got his stunner off a wall peg and buckled it on. He was a big man but moved swiftly for all his size.

"Later on you'll tell us," Harry Chokamaru, the Martian corporal, grinned, "you had a royal flush."

Loder made an obscene gesture but smiled. "Just three ladies," he said, moving toward the door. "But it was enough to win, wasn't it?"

Instead of waiting for the little Martian's answer, he went outside and slipped into the pneumo-tube, pressing the tab which would whisk him up from the bowels of the station to its shell, specifically to the area of the shell which contained the Trans Planetary ticket desks.

As the tube cylinder flashed away toward the surface of the station, toward the shell, Loder thought, it's probably nothing. A drunk hot-blooded Venusian whose reservations had been fouled up. Something like that. The Venusians from their goddamn water-world gave more trouble than anyone. Well, what the hell, Loder said to himself. I got in two hours of good poker while on ready call. That's more than you could reasonably expect.

He made his appearance at the Trans Planetary ticket desk less than sixty seconds after the loudspeaker had blared its call for help. Twenty-two. Something we can't handle. A job for the police.

A tridim grid map of the solar system, drawn out of scale so Uranus, Neptune and Pluto could be included in the limited space, decorated the wall behind the Trans Planetary ticket desks. Flashing gold lines connected the planets, showing Trans Planetary's routes through the solar system. The half dozen Trans Planetary dispatchers in their gold uniforms did not seem at all harried. Loder began to wonder why they had summoned the police. Only about a score of people were waiting at the long line of desks, confirming reservations or getting their luggage weighed in prior to the ship's departure.

Loder heard a woman say, "But it's only three pounds overweight."

"Lady," the dispatcher who had been checking her luggage on a z-grav scale re-

plied, "that's three pounds too much."

"But I thought in space everything was weightless."

"It is, but there's no ferry station where you're going. Nine-tenths of the load of your liner is fuel, did you know that? To brake the flight through space," the dispatcher went on patiently, "so you'll be able to land. That's why you'll have to get rid of the three pounds somewhere."

Loder cleared his throat and said, "I'm answering the twenty-two. Where is it?"

The dispatcher looked at him, taking in the black and silver uniform of the station police, Loder's tall muscular frame and the hard, unreadable face. "Inside, officer," he said, jerking a thumb behind him to a door which bore the legend, *Authorized Personnel Only.*

"Bad one?" Loder asked.

"I wouldn't know," the dispatcher admitted, returning his attention to the woman, who had opened her luggage on the z-grav scale and was trying to decide what she could leave behind.

Loder walked to one of the breaks in the long line of Trans Planetary ticket desks. A moment later he was behind the desks and heading for the door which the dispatcher had indicated. He pressed the button and waited for the door to iris open for him, like a camera shutter. Then he stepped inside.

It was a large almost bare room. Near one wall was a model of a Trans Planetary liner. Not far from it was a chair-grouping, a desk and several filing cabinets. The office of a minor Trans Planetary functionary, Loder decided.

One of the men seated in the chair-grouping got up and came over to Loder. "I'm Donaldson, officer," he said. "T. P. Passenger Relations chief."

"You turned in the twenty-two call?" Loder asked him.

Donaldson nodded uncomcomfortably. "Probably no reason," he said. "But I had to. Regulations. He's over here, officer."

Donaldson led Loder back to the chair-grouping. Two other men were seated there, one wearing the Trans Planetary lapel button. Loder ignored him and studied the other man, a small thin fellow in a rumpled tweed-tex tunic and bright scarlet leggings, with a sallow long-nosed face and small deepset harried looking eyes. A Martian, Loder decided. At least, half a Martian. It was hard to tell.

"I'm officer Loder of the station police," he introduced himself. "What seems to be the trouble here, sir?"

"They won't believe me," the little man said in a surprisingly deep voice.

"What won't they believe?"

"About the Golden Comet, out of Ganymede."

"That's our newest liner," Donaldson explained for Loder's benefit. "Maiden run. They're often built out there on the Jovian Moons, you know. Metal's cheaper there. Cuts the costs in half."

"Yeah," Loder said.

"I just happen to know, that's all," the little man said.

"What do you just happen to know?"

"The Golden Comet is going to crash when it gets here."

Donaldson cleared his throat uncomfortably. The other T. P. official looked at Loder helplessly. Loder said, "How do you know?"

"I'd much rather not say, officer. If you don't mind."

Another crank, Loder thought wearily. There were so many of them. But, of course, you couldn't tell. A hundred cranks a day. And one man who maybe knew what he was talking about, although he looked like a crank too. And fifteen hundred passengers aboard the Golden Comet on its maiden voyage, heading in now across space from Ganymede. Loder suddenly felt his heart beating harder, faster. Joyce was on the Golden Comet. A stewardess.

"Don't you see the position we're in?" Donaldson pleaded with the little man. "We'd like to take action. There is certain action we can take. But unless you tell us what you know—"

"Oh, no. No, sir. I'd rather not. Just it's going to crash, that's all."

Loder said, "You see the position you put me in. I'll have to detain you until the Golden Comet arrives. When's it due, Mr. Donaldson?"

Donaldson pressed a button on the wall and said, "Get me flight control." Then he said: "Sandy? Donaldson. Is the Comet on schedule? Is that so? Thanks, Sandy." He turned to Loder. "She's running sweet, officer. Ahead of schedule all the way. Due here in forty-five minutes. Already inside Luna's orbit and still coming fast. Some ship, huh?"

"It will be a tragedy," the little man said.

Loder couldn't help grinning. Donaldson looked like he wanted to punch the little man. Loder said, "Have you found out who he is?"

"No," Donaldson admitted. He sounded surprised, as if it were something he should have thought of but somehow neglected.

"I am Gil M'sorgolu," the little man said.

Martian, all right, Loder thought. So what? There are good Martians and bad Martians, same as everybody else. Probably some crazy Martians too. Like M'sorgolu. But the name was familiar. He lit a cigarette and let the name roll around inside his head, waiting for it to trigger something. M'sorgolu. Now, where had he heard it?

"Say, wait a minute," Donaldson said. He looked like he was trying hard not to be horrified but failing. "A Martian name of M'sorgolu was chief engineer in charge of Golden Comet construction. Wasn't he?"

"Yes," said M'sorgolu.

"But he's coming in on the Comet."

"No," said M'sorgolu.

"I happen to know—"

"He is my brother, Mr. Donaldson. He changed his mind. He had to change his mind, you see. I wish you wouldn't make me go on."

"You better keep talking now," Donaldson said, suddenly grim.

"I am no engineer, but my brother space-radio'd me from Ganymede on the eve of the departure and said the Comet was not safe. An argument he had with the construction staff. He lost. He says they are crazy. They say he is crazy. The Comet's braking rockets, he maintains, will not be sufficient to stop its flight in the usual time. I did not wish to say it. I do not wish to involve my brother. I wish I had not come here."

They were ignoring M'sorgolu now. Donaldson scratched his head and told Loder, "I remember hearing about some kind of a controversy like that."

"But damn it, man," Loder said. "There's no guesswork about braking. It's mass and velocity and the amount of force which has to be exerted—"

Donaldson shook his head. "Not on the Comet. They're using something new. Negative subatomic stuff. It's way beyond me. Null-matter, they call it. Works all right in scale, though."

"My brother does not wish—" M'sorgolu began.

"To hell with your brother," Loder told him. Loder was thinking of Joyce Wilbur aboard the Golden Comet. Our stationary romance, she al-

ways used to tell him. Because the only time they ever saw each other was on the space station. Loder said, "Call the Comet, Mr. Donaldson. Call them now."

"But we can't do a thing. They're already inside braking range."

"Call them anyway."

Donaldson shrugged, put the call through and asked Loder for a cigarette.

Before the call could be completed, the loudspeaker voice bawled impersonally across the space station shell: "Call thirty-three. Attention! Call thirty-three!"

Loder looked at Donaldson without speaking. Call thirty-three. It hadn't changed since the days of the Earth airports. Thirty-three alerted the crash crews. Thirty-three was what you hoped you'd never hear at a space station. Thirty-three, although the passengers at the station were never told this, was crash alarm. Crash expected, it said. Make ready, crash crew, although there's tragically little you can do.

"What ship on thirty-three?" Donaldson barked into his intercom.

There was a split-second pause as the electronic brain at the hub of the space station satisfied itself that the call had come from an authorized source and then checked its data. "Trans Planetary Golden Comet, earthbound from Ganymede," the voice said.

Loder was already running for where the station police kept their one-man scout rockets.

II

JOYCE WILBUR knew something was wrong when Captain Karr buzzed her from the control cabin, for Karr was the very opposite of the stereotyped Venusian. He was as cool—make that as cold, she amended as she worked her way up three levels to the control deck of the Golden Comet—as the dark side of Pluto, and as level-headed as a mechanical brain.

They had started to brake the enormous liner ten minutes ago. The sudden return from weightlessness always gave Joyce a tremendous appetite. The other stewardesses joked about it. After every planetfall and the subsequent feasting, she'd have to watch her calories for a week.

Joyce entered the control cabin and saw that most of the other girls had already arrived there. Captain Karr was pacing back and forth, his

hands clasped behind his back, the great sweep of space behind him through the observation wall, with the pale gray-green Earth filling one corner of it.

"Trouble," Karr said finally in his clipped voice. "Brakes won't do it, I think."

"Crash landing?" the chief stewardess asked him.

"Crash," said Captain Karr. "Right into a spoke of the space station, I think."

"Can't we avoid it?" Joyce said.

"Would I have sent for all of you? If we avoid it we'd hit Earth's atmosphere at this speed and burn to a cinder. If we veer off entirely, we won't have enough fuel for another try."

"What's going to happen?" one of the other stewardesses demanded nervously.

Karr grinned at her. "I ain't God. I already called thirty-three into the station. All we can do is hope we come out of the crash slow enough to head for Earth and make a forced landing there somewhere."

"But this ship wasn't built for planetfall on a world with an atmosphere as heavy as Earth's," the chief stewardess said.

Karr shrugged. "I didn't build her. I just fly her. That's all I can do."

"In that case—" the chief stewardess began.

"Let me do the talking," Karr said bleakly. "You keep order. Be nice to them. Make love to them. Kick their teeth in. Do whatever you have to, but keep order. If there's a panic, we won't have a chance. Every crew member has got to be at his station, which leaves you stewardesses to watch the passengers. You understand?"

"But I don't see—" the chief stewardess started to say.

"You," Karr barked at her. "How'd you get your rating? Just listen, that's all. We need someone to serve coffee to the crew. That's you." It was a slap in the face to this woman, who had had ten years of uninterrupted service since she was twenty-one. It was a job usually reserved for the most inexperienced of stewardesses. She nodded, though, from force of habit, tossing the captain a crisp salute and heading for the galley.

"Wilbur," Captain Karr said. "That leaves you in charge of the stewardesses. *You* got any questions?"

"No, sir," Joyce said.

"I know what you all want to ask," Karr went on. "Will we get through this all right? Ain't that it, Wilbur?"

"I don't know, sir," Joyce said.

"I don't know, either. If we'll come through it alive. I don't have to tell you to be optimistic with the passengers. Nothing ever happens on *their* ship. It's only the other ones, the ones they read about. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"For your own information," Karr said, "we got maybe one chance in five. On Venus we say *targo*. Good enough. You can't ask for more in life. You're going to die, anyway. Get out there and convince them otherwise, will you?"

As they filed out, one of the girls said to Joyce, very unladylike, very objective, very much without passion, "The bastard. He's just like a machine."

"He has to be," Joyce said.

"Hey, stewardess!" an Earthman called as they got out on the first class passenger deck. "What's the secret convention about? Or were you taking a few snorts before the landing?"

"Something like that," Joyce assured him, feeling the emptiness inside her. She smiled mechanically and then went about briskly answering questions and making glib explanations. The temporary promotion to chief stewardess, she thought, might stick. She was only twenty-three and it was quite an unexpected rating.

If we live through this, she thought.

Ed . . . Ed Loder—will I ever see you again?

"Got one ready?" Loder yelled as he sprinted into the rocket room.

"Yeah, but—" the police dispatcher began.

"You heard the thirty-three, didn't you?"

"I didn't hear any orders for a scoutship—"

"Well, you're hearing them now. Where's the ship?"

Naturally, it was unofficial. There was no reason for a member of the station police to blast off for the stricken Golden Comet. No official reason. For Loder, though, the personal reason was motivation enough.

"Maybe I'd better check with Central," the dispatcher said.

"Maybe you better not."

"Say listen, guy. I got as high a rate as you have, you know? Don't come barging in here and—"

Loder hit the dispatcher as hard as he could with his right fist. It was a straight stiff right hand because a

looping one would have given the dispatcher time to see what was coming. It took the dispatcher flush on the mouth and sent him slamming back against his desk. He sat down slowly, not falling very hard. But he did not try to get up.

Loder rubbed his bruised knuckles. His arm was stiff and numb to the elbow. He went around the desk and through the open door there and out to the launching racks. A dozen one-man scoutships were ready to go. He selected the first one in line and climbed in, stretching out to his full length in the cramped space which was barely sufficient for a small man. Loder was not a small man. He clamped the lid over his head and thought, this is what it must feel like in a coffin. There was more room in a coffin. The scoutships were not built for comfort and certainly not for claustrophobes, he went on thinking with a tight smile. He thumbed the lever which opened the escape hatch in the station shell, then watched the signal light blinking on and off. He punched the rocket keys with a savage jerk of his hand and felt the sudden slamming twisting pressure of blast off grabbing and holding his entrails.

Then he blacked out.

III

"ABSOLUTE speed?" asked Captain Karr.

"Sixty-seven mps," the mechanical brain told him.

"Speed relative to the space station?"

"Sixty-one-point-eight. We are coming in behind it."

"Good," snapped Karr, as if the brain could understand him. "It's our only hope. But if we don't slow down a lot, we're going to hit too hard. We'll crash land on Earth, all right, but we'll take part of the space station down with us." He found a bottle on the floor between his feet and lifted it and took a drink. He had been drinking heavily for the past twenty minutes because he had done everything he could and now all that was left was prayer and drink, whichever you preferred. Captain Karr had decided on drink.

"Absolute speed?" he asked again, for the tenth time.

"Fifty-two mps."

"Good," said Karr. "We're slowing. Speed relative to the space station?"

"Forty - six - point - eight mps."

"But we're not slowing fast enough. Slowing fast enough," Karr mumbled. "Sounds like there's a paradox there some-

where. Fasting slow enough. Hell, no. We're going to hit the station and take part of it down with us. A regular old-fashioned station break," he said to himself or to the mechanical brain which was not listening and would never really listen to anything. He said it again, enjoying the pun as the liquor fog reached his brain. "A regular station break. St. Peter and the Devil are giving the commercials, because in a few minutes we all ought to be going one way or the other. Ain't that right, old brain, old brain?"

"Data not sufficient for conclusion," the brain said after a split-second delay.

"You have no imagination," Captain Karr said, taking another drink. He thought, I could be broken for this. Seventeen years in Trans Planetary, and they'd break me if they knew. But what the hell, I've done everything I could. What do they expect me to do, change into a clean shirt?

"Absolute speed?" asked Captain Karr.

The brain told him.

"Relative speed?"

The brain told him that too.

Then he asked the question he did not like asking. The one which mattered. The important question which told you whether you could expect to live or die in the next few moments. "How far out are we?"

"Eleven thousand miles," said the mechanical brain.

It sounded like a vast distance. In the old terminology, it was practically like skimming the runway. Eleven thousand miles. Current relative speed, just short of forty mps. Assuming the average over-all speed to be twenty between here and the station —which the brain now confirmed as an accurate assumption—they would cover twenty miles of space every second, twelve hundred miles every minute. In a good deal less than ten minutes they would reach the space station.

And crash.

Captain Karr picked up his bottle again and tilted the amber prayer to his mouth and drank.

"You're here!" Joyce cried. "You're here. . . ."

"I almost couldn't tractor it," Loder said. "Your speed and mine added up to a hundred a second."

"Oh, don't talk about that now. Don't, don't . . . mmmmm, that's right, Ed . . . that's what—"

But finally, he moved back away from her and said, "She

won't brake down enough, will she?"

"Not according to Captain Karr."

"I had a pilot's license once," Loder said with sudden vehemence in his voice.

"I know you did. You never want to talk about it."

"To hell with it," Loder said.

"No. Maybe you can do some good. Captain Karr's a drinker."

Loder grinned at her. It was not a pleasant grin. "What the hell," he said. "There's only a certain amount you can do. After that, it's machinery. All machinery. Karr's all right or they wouldn't have given him the Comet. Now, would they?"

"Why don't you go forward anyway? You're here when you shouldn't be. You're already in trouble. Come on, I'll go with you."

"All right," Loder said, not really knowing why but remembering his own pilot rating, long ago. Five years. It seemed like a lifetime. It was the loneliness on those smaller ships. That and playing God to a cargo, or a handful of passengers. You had to drink. Eventually. Most of them did, on duty. Most of them weren't caught. Those few who were, were busted. As an example. Loder had been caught. You pray or you drink, he thought.

And went forward with Joyce.

Unavoidably, Loder's presence created a stir of speculation on the Golden Comet. For two weeks now, since departure from Ganymede, the Comet had been a circumscribed universe. There had been no black-and-gold uniformed policeman in that universe. Now, suddenly, he was there. But Loder shrugged when Joyce pointed this out on their way forward.

"So what?" he said. "If they had time to think about it, they might worry. But they don't. What have we got, ten minutes?"

"I think it's less than that."

"So, let them wonder."

They worked their way forward, through tourist class and second class and first class. The passengers seemed speculative. The stewardesses seemed downright astounded, if you were looking for their reaction. If you weren't, if you were just a casual passenger enjoying the last few minutes of the Golden Comet's maiden flight—without the necessity for crash hammocks thanks to the new stasis generator—you missed it entirely.

"Here we are," Joyce said finally.

Loder took a deep breath and gazed for a long few seconds at the shuttered door in front of them. Beyond it was the control cabin. Beyond it was the trigger for Loder's bitter memories. For, had he remained in pilot service, he might have had a big ship like this by now. The memories came tumbling back—the long silent cargo runs among the asteroids, the old days of the crash hammocks, the small passenger ships with the strong cameraderie developed and nurtured in the absolute loneliness of space, all the good lost memories which belonged to another life.

"Let's go," Loder said. His voice sounded strange.

Inside the control cabin, Captain Karr was seated in front of the observation wall. Now Earth was a large pale green globe filling a third of the wall. Off to one side, the space station was still a small black dot.

"What do you want?" he said thickly, not getting up. He seemed very surprised to see Joyce. He seemed even more surprised at sight of Loder.

"How much time is there?" Loder asked him.

"You've no right to be in here."

"No? There are fifteen hundred people out there who will live or die, depending on what happens in here. You don't appear to be doing much about it."

Karr stood up unsteadily and lumbered toward Loder. "What would you have me do, stop the ship with my own hands?"

"How much time?" Loder asked again.

"Five minutes. Maybe less."

"Then damn it, man. Listen to me. Why don't you swing the ship around and use the rear rockets to brake?"

Karr sneered at him. "Yeah? Without warning? Without crash hammocks? Can you imagine what'll happen out there?"

"Yes," Loder said. "I can imagine all right. But otherwise—"

"Otherwise," Joyce finished for him, "they'll all die."

"And the station," Loder said. "Your orbiting for the station, aren't you?"

"I guess so," Karr mumbled. He was standing in front of the observation wall now, gazing at the small black dot of the space station. Which grew, and grew—and grew.

"You know how many people work at the station?" Lo-

der demanded. "Fourteen thousand, Captain. Fourteen thousand people—who know what's coming off now, but who can't stop it. You know how many passengers are waiting to ship out from there? Another three or four thousand. Almost twenty thousand people, Captain. And you sit there drink yourself into—"

Before he could get the word out, Karr lunged toward him and hit him. Loder rolled with the blow, which had still hurt him. He fell over backwards but cat-quick for all his size got to his feet again, his fists ready.

"Ed!" Joyce pleaded. "Ed. Three minutes now."

"We'll do it my way because it's the only way," Karr panted. "Three minutes, Miss Wilbur? Then all I have to do is hold off your friend three minutes—"

Loder, realizing this was true, closed with the big captain quickly. They stood for many seconds squared off so closely that neither man could swing a full-armed blow. They stood that way, fists thudding against bodies, heads protected over one another's shoulder. It looked like they might go on that way for many times the three minutes which remained.

And then Captain Karr brought up his knee.

Loder felt it and then felt a numbness, and then the pain came in a wave. He buckled slowly and fell, Karr using a rabbit punch on him as he went. He hit the floor hard and rolled over barely in time to avoid Karr's heavy boot. His groping hand closed on something near the base of the pilot chair. It was Karr's bottle.

All right, Loder thought. All right. You'd rather not fight this way. But twenty thousand lives . . .

His fingers closed on the neck of the bottle. He lay there, as if exhausted. He waited for Karr to come for him. But Karr had one more trick. He did not come headfirst, fists flailing, as Loder had expected. He came feet first, stamping.

Loder squirmed away, missing the full impact of the heavy boots but catching the toe of one on his cheek. He could feel the flesh ripping but managed to roll away and up on his knees. Karr came for him, quickly, decisively, to finish it—

And took the smashing bottle across his face.

It shattered, leaving a jagged piece of bottleneck in Lo-

der's hand. Bottleneck, he thought, smiling grimly. That's what Karr was. I had to do it.

Karr was flat on his back, but breathing. A gash ran from earlobe to cleft of chin on one side of his face, across the face at an angle like a new too large lopsided crimson mouth. Joyce was sobbing.

But Loder hardly saw her. He seated himself at the controls. His hands were trembling unexpectedly, not as an aftermath of the fight but because now, all at once, he was sitting in a pilot chair again and the familiar skills came flooding back as if they had resided over the gulf of years not in his brain which would forget them slowly but in his fingertips where such knowledge eventually becomes reflex. Out of sheer unexpected happiness, Loder laughed. Then he asked the mechanical brain: "How much time?"

"One minute and ten seconds," the brain said.

"Get on the ship intercom," Loder flung over his shoulder at Joyce. "Tell them we're flipping in space. Tell them to grab hold of something. Anything. And grab hold of something yourself."

Seconds later he heard Joyce's calm voice: "Attention! Attention, please. This is the chief stewardess. Your attention. This is an emergency. In order to prevent a serious accident we are turning the ship around in space. You have approximately—" she looked at Loder who held up both hands—"ten seconds to secure yourselves however you can." She began to count off the time for them. "Nine, eight, seven—"

"How much time?" Loder asked the mechanical brain.

"Forty-one seconds."

He looked once more, quickly, at the image of Earth on the observation wall. It filled almost the entire wall now, and dead center in front of the expanding planet was the small black shape of the space station, the hub, the spokes and the shell all now clearly visible and swelling as if a camera were panning in toward the station. He could flip the Golden Comet and fire the aft rockets and pray, but he did not think they would slow sufficiently in less than forty seconds . . .

"Three," said Joyce, indicating the time left before Loder would fire the lateral rockets and turn the Golden Comet around in space, "two, one, fire!"

And for Loder at the last split second, it seemed incredible that his mere pressing of

a button on the control board could be so fateful and dramatic an event.

He pressed the button.

IV

IN THE first split second, divorced from all time and all meaning, Loder was only aware of the altered picture on the observation wall of the control cabin. The globe of Earth jerked, danced and spun away. As the Golden Comet swung a full hundred and eighty degrees in space, the black, star-gleaming firmament leaped into visibility on the observation wall.

Then with the Golden Comet still hurtling aft-first at the Station, Loder slammed on the rear rockets. He felt himself thrust forward suddenly, wondering with an odd detachment if the time of his life and of all the lives aboard the spaceship could be measured in seconds only. The Golden Comet's radarscopes flashed their automatic warning. Bells clanged throughout the length of the ship. Distantly, Loder heard the sound of people screaming.

He tumbled from the pilot chair and was chained by gravity against the control board. Gravity pinned him there and he thought oddly of a bug squashed against the windshield of a ground car.

Meaninglessly, the mechanical brain said, "Contact has been made."

Loder dragged himself up slowly against the control board, moving slowly toward the televised image of the aft observation wall. He took one look at it and cut off the rear rockets, feeling the terrible pressure leave his body abruptly.

Joyce staggered toward him and said, "What happened?"

Instead of answering, Loder pointed grimly at the TV screen. There, attached like enormous antennae to either side of the aft section of the liner, were two sheered off spokes of the space station. On each two hundred yard long spoke Loder could see the tiny figures of space-suited men clinging precariously.

"Then—then we hit the station," Joyce sobbed.

"We hit it. We took two spokes out of twenty with us," Loder told her. "But we could have smashed the whole station. It's still intact, I think."

"What are you going to do?" Joyce asked him.

Alarm buzzers were sounding from all sections of the spaceship. Loder said, "That would be your stewardesses. They've got frightened pas-

sengers on their hands and don't know what to do, or what to tell them. Casualties too."

"I can go out there and help them, but what are *you* going to do?"

Before Loder could answer her, Captain Karr climbed unsteadily to his feet and rasped, "He isn't going to do anything. As Captain of this ship, I'm putting him under arrest."

"Don't be a fool," Loder said. "The Golden Comet isn't built for landing on Earth, but we're in an interception orbit right now. We have no choice but to try a landing. Could you put her down, Karr?"

Captain Karr answered the question with one of his own. "Could you?"

"I don't know," Loder admitted. "But I'm ready to try."

"There must be another way. We couldn't chance it. We've got fifteen hundred people aboard. We—"

"If you don't do anything, we'll go down like a meteor, Karr. The Comet's skin can take a lot of friction, but not that much—or that long."

"I could take her up again and try for a landing on the moon," Karr blurted as the thought occurred to him. "She's built to land on a small body like the moon."

Loder shook his head. "Sure, but what are you going to use for fuel?"

Karr studied the fuel gauges. "There might be enough," he said.

Again Loder shook his head. "We're already well inside Earth's field of gravity, Captain. We wouldn't need an escape velocity of seven miles per second, but we'd need at least three or four. We wouldn't have enough fuel. But if we try—" Loder spread his hands out eloquently enough and said one word. He said: "Meteor." It was spaceman's jargon for a derelict liner making planetfall without any means of checking its speed. Sometimes a fused metallic lump was found. Often, there wasn't even that.

"You see," Karr said triumphantly. "You see? If we need an escape speed of three or four to blast clear again, we'd need a braking speed of three or four to land on Earth. So your idea is no good, either."

"That's where you're all wrong," Loder said. "Our only chance is to go into an interception orbit of narrowing concentric circles. It's time consuming but less fuel con-

suming. It's that—or nothing."

Captain Karr turned away from him disgustedly and said to Joyce, "Another one of these armchair pilots. If we listened to them we'd never get a liner up or down safely anywhere." Karr fingered his split cheek, where the blood was beginning to clot. "Wilbur," he went on, "I can't spare a man for the job. I want you to confine this man under arrest in one of our vacant cabins."

Since Ed had overpowered Captain Karr and turned the Golden Comet around in space, everything had seemed dreamlike and unreal to Joyce Wilbur. The faulty Golden Comet had seemed doomed on its maiden flight, heading on collision orbit for the space station. Then Ed had appeared, almost miraculously. So far, he had managed to prevent disaster. But Joyce sensed now it was only a temporary reprieve. The real struggle was still ahead of them.

Her own personal struggle was beginning right now.

Captain Karr stood for Authority. Aboard a spaceship, the word of the captain was absolute law. It had to be. There was no other way. Too many unexpected things cropped up even in a routine flight. You had to obey the captain. They taught you that at stewardess school and it was a lesson learned and relearned on every spaceflight.

Now the captain—her captain—wanted Ed Loder placed under arrest. Ed thought he could save the Golden Comet from disaster. Captain Karr thought otherwise. All this stood outside the realm of Joyce's knowledge, but Captain Karr had ordered her to confine Ed Loder.

Ed. She was in love with Ed. Or all the preparation for and practice of her career. Because surely now she would have to decide. Captain Karr was holding a small stunner pistol out for her. Ed hadn't tried to reach the holstered stunner hanging at his hip.

"Ed," Joyce said.

He shrugged. "That's all right, kid. I understand. I know how it is."

"Here you are," Captain Karr said, and gave Joyce the stunner.

"The only thing is—" Loder began.

"There is no only thing as far as you're concerned," Captain Karr said, "the fact of your confinement."

"The only thing is, Captain Karr won't have a chance his way."

Joyce took the stunner but made no move to lead Loder outside the control cabin. "He used to be a pilot, sir," she said stubbornly. "Maybe he knows what he's talking about."

"A pilot?" Karr sneered. "Of what? Overage tubs in the asteroid belt and uncharted liners out in the Jovian moons?"

"Sir, he had a pretty good rating until—"

"Until what?" Captain Karr demanded triumphantly, pouncing on that one word.

"Same as you," Loder said dryly. "A man gets so he's got to drink in space, even when on duty. Unless he's religious. Deeply religious. You know that. It's part of our fraternity. We all know it. Some of us get caught."

"You sanctimonious bastard!" Captain Karr cried. "You, trying to preach to me. You—"

"Please," Joyce said.

"I still don't think you'll have a chance, Captain," Loder persisted. "Not with the fuel you have left."

Karr suddenly switched the mechanical brain's data-feeder to active and muttered, "We'll see about that," before he asked the brain, "With present orbit and orbital speed, is enough fuel remaining to pull clear of Earth's gravitational field and brake for a landing on the moon?"

Joyce held her breath waiting for the answer. If it were affirmative, the Golden Comet could be piloted to safety, but Ed Loder would be on his way to prison. If it were negative, they might all die.

"This ship," the mechanical brain finally responded, "now contains in its tanks sufficient fuel to blast clear of Earth's gravitational field and land successfully on the moon—with utterly no margin for error."

"There!" Captain Karr said, more to Joyce than to Loder. "You see?"

Joyce bit her lip and said nothing. Loder grinned without humor and said, "You're forgetting one thing, Captain."

"I'm not forgetting anything."

"We hit the space station. We took two spokes with us. How much do they weigh, Captain? There's the margin for error the brain mentioned. Only, there can't be any. You have barely enough fuel, assuming we weren't carrying the station spokes pick-a-back."

"I don't know how much they weigh," Captain Karr

said. "It couldn't be much. It couldn't be enough to matter."

"It's more than enough. Each spoke weighs in the neighborhood of seventeen-hundred tons. Add thirty-four-hundred tons to your gross weight and see what the brain says."

At first Joyce thought Captain Karr would do it, but then the Venusian's face darkened and he said, sharply, "Enough. I don't have time to waste. Take him, Wilbur."

"But, sir. Shouldn't you—"

"Miss Wilbur!" Karr roared. He said Miss only when he was very angry, she knew. It meant he was reminding himself of her sex so he wouldn't resort to physical violence.

"Yes, sir," she said, and saluted. She looked mutely at Loder, who went docilely with her toward the rear of the Golden Comet—and confinement.

V

SO HERE it is, Captain Karr thought. Given to you. Placed in front of you where you can see it. Ask the mechanical brain. Ask it about this thirty-four-hundred-ton margin for error. Why don't you ask it, Captain Karr?

He sat there, neither blasting clear of Earth's gravitational field as he said he would nor computing an interception orbit of concentric circles. He stared at the loudspeaker of the mechanical brain and hated it.

He avoided the one important question. He said, "What is our present altitude?"

"Four thousand nine hundred and forty-seven miles," the mechanical brain responded.

"Our speed of fall?"

"It was temporarily checked by the rear rockets. It is now just short of one mile a second but increasing slowly."

Karr turned away from the loudspeaker, a big tired-looking man, and took another bottle from the cabinet behind him. The liquid amber prayer, he thought. He held the bottle up to the light and stared at it for several moments. Abruptly he swung it with savage force against the control board, smashing it. He smiled and dropped the shattered neck of glass he held in his hand.

"Brain," he said, "tell me. With thirty-four-hundred extra tons?"

"Data not sufficient to phrase a question."

"Damn you!" he raged, as if the mechanical brain were a human being. "Would we have sufficient fuel, adding thirty-four-hundred tons to

our gross weight, to blast clear of Earth and make planetfall on the moon?"

After a pause of two seconds, the mechanical brain said: "Adding thirty-four-hundred tons to the gross weight of the Golden Comet, the entire load of fuel would be exhausted in any attempt to reach the speed of escape."

Wildly, Karr thought the brain had erred. But then he laughed. The sound of his own laughter—almost hysterical—shocked him. Mechanical brains didn't make mistakes.

It was Karr who had made the mistake. He held his right hand out in front of him and watched the fingers trembling. He needed a drink. God, he needed one. There was no bottle left in the cabinet. He looked for many moments at the sweep of space through the observation wall. He sobbed. He found it very difficult to concentrate.

Karr, he thought, you're going to be all washed up after this one. If you live.

But you won't live, will you? The Comet's going to crash, isn't it? Why don't you admit it, Karr? At least admit it to yourself. No one's here. No one's listening. You've been lucky. That other fellow—you don't even know his name— wasn't so lucky. They grounded him. They didn't ground you. They should have, for the same reason. Instead, they gave you command of the biggest liner in space. It's a great big joke, isn't it? Because fifteen hundred lives depend on you, but you can't help them now . . .

Automatically, he went to his space radio and called New York Spaceport. "Golden Comet calling New York Spaceport," he said. "Call thirty-three. Emergency."

The voice sounded unexpectedly close. "Go ahead, Golden Comet."

"We're heading in on collision orbit. Our mechanical brain says we can't blast out for landing on the moon." He added, "Maybe you saw the fireworks."

"Hell, yes, Captain," the impersonal radio voice suddenly became personal. "We saw it."

"I've got a few thousand tons of space station with me," Captain Karr said. "That's the trouble. That's why—"

"What are you going to do?"

"We request permission to attempt an interception orbit of concentric circles, with planetfall point at New York Spaceport."

There was a pause. Then: "The Comet wasn't built for that."

"I know," Karr admitted. "But it's our one chance, unless we jettison the spokes of the space station. And we can't do that. There are station people on those spokes."

"Request granted," the voice said. "We wish you luck, Captain. We'll be tracing your course on radar. Do you need anything?"

"No. The mechanical brain is functioning splendidly."

"Well, then, good luck."

And the radio connection was cut.

Captain Karr sucked in a deep breath. His mind felt exhausted, like your body feels after a vigorous workout. He sat staring at the observation wall as the greater weight of the front of the Golden Comet slowly swung the huge spaceship around so that the globe of Earth, bloated and enormous, slowly came into view.

He sat there and waited and did nothing.

While fifteen hundred people confidently expected him to save them.

"What are you doing?" Loder said.

"I can't take you arearships and confine you. I don't care what the Captain said."

"Listen, Joyce. Don't jeopardize your entire career just for me."

"My career? What's the matter with you, Ed? Don't you believe what you said?"

"Yes."

"You said we need an interception orbit in a hurry. You said it was our one chance."

"I still think so. But I could be wrong."

"Ed," Joyce suddenly said impulsively. "Tell me: if you were Captain of the Golden Comet, what would you do?"

"I'd set a concentric interception orbit. I'd have to."

"And what Captain Karr wants to do, it won't work?"

Loder shook his head.

"Then come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Here," Joyce said, giving him the stunner. "I don't want this. I probably wouldn't know how to use it, anyway. We're going back to the control cabin. I'll worry about my stewardess rating later. If and when."

"If and when," Loder said. "Same way I'll worry about prison." He paused long enough to kiss Joyce, then hurried with her back the way they'd come. She smiled encouragingly at the passengers as they went.

It was very quiet at the

shuttered doorway leading to the control cabin. One of the stewardesses was there, keeping passengers away.

"What's going on inside?" Joyce asked her.

"Nothing. I can't hear a thing."

"Isn't he doing—anything?"

"I don't know. Why are you asking me? He's the Captain. He ought to know."

"All right," Joyce said.

"You can't bring him in there," the other stewardess told her, gesturing to Loder.

"I'm sorry, Jane. I'm going to."

"But—"

"The Captain put me in charge, didn't he?"

"Yes, but my orders—"

She was still talking about her orders when Loder and Joyce entered the control cabin.

Captain Karr sat there, staring at them. He did not try to get up. He said nothing until Loder pointed the stunner tentatively in his direction. Then he said, "That's all right, fellow. You don't have to point that thing at me. I'm all through, I guess. A man gets to know when he's all through. Do whatever you think you have to. I won't try to stop you."

Loder looked at Joyce, who seemed very surprised. Loder said, "Not on your life, Captain. We're doing it together. A man has to admit it to himself sooner or later, that's all. Space is too big. Too damn big for anybody to face alone. Come on."

The slow beginning of a smile curved Karr's lips. He stood up and followed Loder to the mechanical brain.

"Problem," Loder said. "We want to land in an interception orbit of concentric circles. Considering our gross weight plus thirty-four-hundred tons, can we do it?"

"No," the brain said at once.

Loder heard Joyce sob. The smile faded, stillborn, from Captain Karr's lips.

"So there it is," Karr said grimly. "Not my way—but not your way, either."

"Wait a minute," Loder said, returning to the brain. "Listen. Its answers are factual, but naive. Can we do it? What does that question mean, Captain? To the brain, it probably means can we definitely do it. And the answer is no.

"Let's try it this way. Brain," he said, "in answer to the previous question, what chance have we?"

"Altitude is three thousand miles even. Too low," the

brain said. "Current speed, one point-seven miles per second. Too fast. You have one chance in from three to seven, depending on the skill and ability of the pilot at the controls."

Loder looked up with a tired but happy smile on his face. "You see?" he said. "Captain, sit down at the controls. We're ready."

Karr walked slowly to the control chair, sat there. Loder told the brain, "Compute the interception orbit, please, with New York Spaceport as our destination. Keep monitoring it as we go down."

The brain clicked and hummed. Bright numbers appeared on the control board. All at once Karr stood up and held his face in his hands, sobbing, "I can't! I can't do it. I—it's like I've forgotten everything."

"Altitude, two thousand seven hundred and ninety," the mechanical brain intoned.

"You've got to," Loder said. "It's either that or—"

"Here," Karr said. "You take the controls. I can't . . ."

Loder sat down swiftly in his place. There was no safety strap. The Golden Comet had not been built for interception orbits on a planet of Earth's size. Loder began to punch the control buttons. At first he thought the old remembered skills would desert him now. It did not seem possible that they would remain, all of them, in perfect order, giving a knowledge to his fingertips which his brain had maintained over the years in a hidden place of which he knew nothing. But he sat there hunched over the control board, locking his feet around the legs of the chair to hold his weight against the gravity which tried to wrench him loose, jabbing the control buttons with an expertness which amazed him.

"Look at him," he heard Joyce say. "Look at him, sir. There's a *pilot.*" It was not meant as a comparison with Karr, who had temporarily lost the keen edge of his control. Karr must have sensed that, because Loder was aware dimly of him nodding and agreeing with Joyce.

"Fifteen hundred miles," said the mechanical brain. "One chance in ten to fifteen. Speed too great. Acceleration has not been checked."

That sobered them. Fifteen hundred miles out—and fifteen hundred people, Loder thought. Depending on him. All of them. Suddenly the old feeling came back. The God feeling, he had called it. But it

wasn't the God feeling now. Now he would call it almost something humble. In the early days, in the cocky days when he had strutted across the outworlds waiting for his next assignment, he had called himself lord of space. He and all the other cocky young pilots. He could still remember it vividly, as if it had all been yesterday.

But now he knew. At last he knew. He hoped he wouldn't die now with his new knowledge. Space was the lord and the real master. It was space which held the strings and called the shots and made the decisions and perhaps man, if he were humble enough and steadfast enough and brave enough, could cut a path of glory for himself across a small segment of the void.

"Twelve hundred miles," said the brain. "Acceleration checked. Speed steady at a mile and a quarter."

Together then, unbidden, unexpected — Captain Karr and Joyce cheered him. He smiled up at them because he did not want to disappoint them. But the hardest part of it was still ahead of him.

He was heavy. Their speed was now very steady, so the force of gravitation pressing against him, holding him to the pilot chair, was gone. But it had left his muscles battered, aching and tired. He played with the controls, delicately. It isn't a business, he thought. It isn't a skill, not even that. It's a work of art. It's got to be. Like a great painting or a symphony, or a novel even. Either you can pilot a spaceship or you can't. All the training and practise in the world won't help you if you can't, but the lack of training and practise will hardly matter if you can.

He pressed the buttons and twisted the dials and wiped the sweat from his forehead and heard the brain say, "Too sharp. Cut it gradually, gradually, you're not in orbit yet."

His eyes burned. His back was stiff. Someone, either Joyce or Captain Karr, placed a lit cigarette between his lips. He inhaled gratefully and returned to the controls.

"Four hundred miles," the brain said. "Apply braking rockets."

He applied them. His body, it now seemed, had an independent existence. The mechanical brain controlled it. His own confused mind did not interpret the messages, it merely relayed them. That too, he thought, was part of the space pilot's art, of this great creative art which might one

day fling mankind on its way to the stars.

"Two hundred miles," said the mechanical brain.

The action of the forward braking rockets slammed into Loder's stomach. He hunched his shoulders and tightened his muscles against it and brought the Golden Comet down in a long arc. He wondered what it would look like from Earth, the spokes of the Station dangling from the ship.

"There's Long Island," Joyce said, pointing at the observation wall.

The entire eastern tip of Long Island, from Riverhead to the sea, was a vast spaceport. He had landed here only once before, Loder remembered, because the old battered tubs which had been his commands weren't often seen in the vicinity of Earth.

"I'll tell them," Karr said. "I'll tell the licensing commission exactly how it happened. You'll get your pilot rating back."

"The hell you will," Loder said. "You'll tell them I helped you. It ought to be enough to get my rating back. Don't tell them it broke you."

"But it did—"

"It did not. It breaks every man that much, sooner or later. It's a miracle it doesn't break a man more. But you've been through the worst of it. That's what you'll tell them, you understand?"

"Ten miles," the mechanical brain said.

He eased her down slowly, gently, almost lovingly. When she finally made planetfall the fuel gauges registered empty. The station spokes flapped and clanked and struck the apron on either side of the giant liner. The administration buildings of the Spaceport, their pastel walls visible through the quartzite in front of Loder, were the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

"Say hello to Earth, *Captain* Loder," Joyce said.

Captain Loder. He hadn't heard the sound of it for many years. But he wouldn't take it Karr's way, not if it meant Karr would be busted.

Karr said, "I don't know what to tell you. I'm so damn grateful. I—" He choked up.

"Just do it my way, then."

As they opened the airlock door, Karr said nothing. But then, the moment they stepped outside he winked at Joyce and said, "You want to know something? I don't even know the name of your friend."

Everything, Loder knew now, was going to be all right.

THE END

While they fought, she darted into the teleporter.

WHAT NUMBER ARE YOU CALLING?

By RON BUTLER

You know about teleportation. Naturally. You step into a gadget, dial your destination and are instantly transported to Mars or the local grocery. Sounds like just the thing to have around the house, you'd think. Well, if you want to get the real picture, listen to what happened to a lovely girl named Doris Loring. You see, she made the mistake of dialing the wrong number!

"BUT I keep getting wrong numbers," Doris Loring insisted.

"Lady," I said, getting my tools together, "I've been all through your 'porter. I stripped it down and put it together again. There's nothing wrong with it."

"Argue with me," she said. She sounded exasperated and I could hardly blame her, *if* there was something wrong with her teleportation set, model 1976-b. But the set

checked out like a brand new factory model. They always did, for teleportation sets are not like telephones. A wrong number can be a serious thing. Doris Loring tapped her lovely foot irritably. "I ought to know if I've been getting wrong numbers, mister."

"Exactly what have you been getting?" I asked, looking at the 'porter. It had a limed oak cabinet and a tinted glass observation window. Second hand, it had cost Miss Loring two thousand dollars, which sounds like a lot of money but isn't. That's less than the price of a new car, and you don't see many cars these days. Teleportation, Inc. has driven them off the streets.

"Oh, all sorts of things," Doris told me. Doris. Already it was going to be Doris and Jack. That's the way we 'porter repairmen operate. We have to. Our bag of tools is a sham, mostly, because nothing ever happens to a teleportation set. But things happen to customers who, naturally, are quite human. We repairmen are—and I quote from the newspaper ad which attracted me to Teleportation, Inc. — "bright young college graduates with poise, charm and degrees in psychology and kindred subjects." We never are electronics wizards. We don't have to be.

"For example?" I asked.

Doris looked around suspiciously, as if she expected to find someone snooping right here in her efficiency apartment. Paranoid type, I thought. Not necessarily dangerous, but we'd probably have to buy back her 'porter just to be on the safe side. 'Porters are not sold to just anyone and they're sold with the option to repurchase at any time. Naturally, they can't be resold by the owner. A 'porter owner must first pass a rigid psychological examination, 'porters being what they are. In the wrong hands, a 'porter can be a deadly instrument. Peeping Toms. Thieves. Assassins. In my time, I've had to deal with all of them.

"Come here," Doris said finally, leading me to a closet.

She slid the door back and disappeared inside the walk-in closet. She reappeared with a small monogrammed suitcase, her initials on it.

"They're in here," she said, placing the suitcase on a chair and opening it. I gawked over her shoulder. She turned and saw the look on my face and said triumphantly, "Well?"

"You mean, they're not yours?"

"They came through the 'porter, Jack. One at a time."

The stuff looked real, but I'm no expert. The stuff was bracelets and necklaces and earrings, gold with rubies and emeralds and diamonds. "You are sure they don't belong to you?" I said again.

"Of course I'm sure."

"O.K.," I said, snapping the suitcase shut. "I'll have to confiscate these. I'll give you a receipt." And I began to write one.

"All right, but you don't understand. They don't just come through the 'porter."

"I thought you said they did."

"They do, but they're brought."

"Brought?"

"A strange little man brings them."

"Now we're getting somewhere," I said, tearing up the receipt. "You don't need this. You're a pretty girl, Doris. You have an admirer, that's all. Of course, we'll have to trace him and probably repurchase his 'porter because it isn't within the code of ethics to make unwanted visits or gifts, but at least you know there's nothing wrong with your teleporter."

"Oh, yes there is!" Doris did more foot-stamping.

"Look—" I began.

"The little man. You'll have to see him."

"I'm sure I will. I'll probably stay on the case."

"He's—odd."

"Odd?" I said.

"Sometimes he seems perfectly normal and other times I don't think he's quite human."

"There are," I said, wondering if she were pulling my leg, "only one genus and species of men. Human men. Therefore—"

"On Earth," Doris said quietly.

"Now look. Earth is the only place. A 'porter is strictly terrestrial. We don't have spaceships."

"Stop talking to me like I'm crazy. I know we don't have spaceships."

"We'll probably have them soon, though," I pointed out by way of changing the subject, "because the big automobile outfits have lost billions to Teleportation, Inc. and are looking for new worlds to conquer."

"That's very interesting, but what are you going to do about the jewelry?"

"When we find your boy, we'll give them back to him. All right?"

"Then you're not going to fix my 'porter?"

"There's nothing to fix."

"But—"

"Sorry, Doris. Well, see ya." I headed for her limed oak 'porter with the tinted window, toting my bag of superfluous tools. I got inside, shut the door and dialed TP 4-1703, which is local Teleportation Headquarters. Through the tinted glass I could see Doris frowning at me. I smiled and waved at her as she began to shimmer. Actually, I did the shimmering. And the vanishing. Atoms. Collocations of energy. Billions of 'em make up a thing. Or a tree. Or a dog. Or a man. In this case, Jack Peters. Me. You hop inside a 'porter and dial someplace and the atoms lose their physical identity and for the briefest fraction of a second become an electronic signal streaking along the wires to where you dialed. It's so quick, you don't have time to lose your awareness of being a physical whole. Although I hear some people are actually afraid to use a 'porter. Like horseless carriages or airplanes in the beginning. Now we don't have need for either. Just 'porters, millions of them. Freight 'porters and personnel 'porters at a monthly cost comparable to your telephone bill. And, of course, you don't need a telephone if you can pay a visit in exactly the time it takes to call.

I ate lunch down at TP Center. The soup was minestrone and had been ladled from a pot in Florence, Italy and served, still piping hot, here on Long Island in the U. S. A. The cost? One dime, thanks to Teleportation, Inc. The waiter was probably just putting the cover back on his pot by the time I started spooning delicious minestrone into my mouth.

After lunch I played penny ante poker with some of the boys until I got a buzz from the repair chief's office. I 'ported up there and smiled at the chief, who didn't smile back.

"You handled this?" he said, giving me a card. The card said LORING, DORIS.

"Yeah."

"And?"

"Routine," I said. "Secret admirer. Gifts."

"And?" the chief repeated. When he did that, something was wrong. Wisely, I held my silence.

He said, "About an hour ago, Doris Loring disappeared."

"What?"

"Disappeared."

"How do you mean, disappeared?"

"She called here, on the telephone."

"Telephone?"

"Telephone. She said she was afraid to use her 'porter. I said, come now. She said she was calling to tell me she was dialing my office to visit me in person, although she didn't like the idea. But she got no satisfaction from our repairman. You?"

"Me," I said.

"Then she disappeared."

"For crying out loud, chief. You mean she changed her mind and didn't dial here."

"Oh yes she did, Jack. I put a routine check on the circuits. She dialed this office but never showed up. I 'ported over to her apartment, but it was empty."

"How'd you get back here?" I demanded. "You used Doris Loring's 'porter, didn't you? Doesn't that prove it's all right?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I didn't. I went downstairs to her lobby and used the public 'porter."

"Hell," I said, "I just used her 'porter myself a couple hours ago."

"That was a couple of hours ago."

"All right. All right, I'll 'port out there and 'port myself right back if it will make you happy."

The chief didn't smile. "It isn't to make me happy, Jack. I want to remind you of something. Teleportation is only a dozen years old. To some people, it still smacks of magic. Black magic. To other people it's the devil incarnate because it took away their business. The automobile companies. The airlines. The railroads. The steamship lines. The—"

"I know all that," I said, my voice steady.

"Well, I'm not saying they're out to get us, but if they get half a chance to have Teleportation, Inc. declared a menace, the smartest lawyers in the country will jump on it with both feet for them. We can't take chances. We can't afford to.

"They'll start asking questions about Doris Loring. It's what they've been looking for. Where is she? Can you picture it in the Sunday supplements? 'Girl vanishes in teleportation set.' They'll start a campaign of fear, Jack. 'You too can lose your identity in an electronic circuit. Don't teleport until you're sure. Can you afford to gamble—with your own life?' "

"Yeah," I said. "I see what you mean."

"All right. Get over there. And use your tools this time."

"I did. The 'porter was in fine shape."

"Try again," the chief said. "I needn't tell you—"

"No, you already did."

"We're depending on you, Jack. Do your best for Teleportation, Inc.—"

"Hell," I said. "For Doris Loring, you mean. The more I think about it the more I'm convinced there was nothing wrong with her."

"That isn't what your report said."

I shrugged. "Tear up the report. I'll write a new one, chief. Pretty, too. She's pretty."

"Loring?"

"Loring. You know something?" I said, heading for the chief's 'porter. "I could like that gal."

"Better find her first."

"Huh? Oh, yeah." I closed the 'porter door behind me. The standard personnel 'porter model is built like a slightly oversized telephone booth. I dialed Doris Loring's number and watched the chief shimmer.

"Doris?" I said as I stepped out of her 'porter. I almost expected to see her in the tidy efficiency apartment. I could smell her perfume very faintly on the air. Dry sandalwood, I thought. The apartment seemed in order. I went to the closet and found the suitcase full of jewelry, then frowned at myself as I passed a mirror over the sofa. Admit it, Jack Peters. You were thinking maybe she skipped out with the contents of that suitcase. Well, it had probably happened before, with or without the benefit of teleportation. Only, Doris Loring hadn't touched the suitcase.

I stood back from the 'porter and examined it. I took my time. I waited half an hour before taking out my tools, removing the panel from behind the 'porter dial and going through the examination routine for the second time today. I didn't hurry. Purposely. I wanted to give Doris every opportunity to come back, normally. Then I went over and looked at myself in that mirror again. That mirror was very strategically located. "Peters," I said, "you're yellow. You're stalling. You're as bad as the chief. You almost believe there's something wrong with the 'porter and you're afraid to try it. Well, aren't you?"

I lit a cigarette and smoked it down as far as I could, then

sighed and approached the 'porter again. I put it together and stood back, studying it. It had come through with flying colors again. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with it. Unless the chief was right. The chief rarely made mistakes.

Doris Loring had disappeared in this 'porter.

There was a lamp on the table near the sofa. I unplugged it and put it inside the 'porter. I used the outside dial and sent the lamp to the chief's office. Or thought I did. When I opened the door, the 'porter was empty. At least the lamp had gone somewhere.

It took me twenty minutes to find someone in the building with a telephone. Those things are almost as obsolete as the pony express. I called the chief. "Did you get it?" I said.

"Of course I got it. What's the gag?"

"No gag. Doris Loring's 'porter. It works."

"I can see that. Where's Miss Loring?"

I shrugged and said I'd try to find out. I told the chief to 'port back Miss Loring's lamp. When I returned to Doris' apartment, the lamp was there, all right. In the 'porter.

But so was Doris' clothing.

Blouse. Fluffy and off the shoulder. It had displayed, I recalled, a lot of lovely shoulder and throat. Skirt, multipleated. Stockings. Underthings. I couldn't vouch for the stockings or the underthings, but the skirt and the blouse had adorned Doris Loring's anatomy this morning. I sat down and surrendered to a thinking funk. I'm not the type and it doesn't happen very often.

Item. Doris Loring had—apparently—disappeared via a teleporter which seemed in perfect working order.

Item. A little—not quite human? — man had been bringing Doris gifts through same.

Item. Doris had, with misgivings, entered the 'porter to visit my chief. It was at that point she had disappeared.

Item. Now her clothing had come home.

Item. They either didn't need clothing where Doris was, or they wore a different kind of clothing. Either way, you had to assume Doris was preparing for a long stay.

Item. You couldn't tell if it was her idea or someone else's.

I looked at the 'porter. I made faces at it. I thought

of all the ex-automobile officials who would be gloating. I stepped inside but didn't close the door. Until the door was closed, the circuits could not work. I thought: Destination—anywhere.

But hell, the lamp had gone through to the chief's office with utterly no snags. So what was I worrying about? I climbed out of the 'porter and picked up Doris' clothing, feeling foolish. Outside, it was a clear cold day. The blouse rustled with static electricity. Maybe she'd need the clothing again, wherever she was.

But that was silly. She had probably just changed her mind and stepped outside and—

The chief had checked the circuits.

I slammed the 'porter door shut with me inside. I dialed the chief's number before I could change my mind and watched the room shimmer.

It was a normal enough room, but it wasn't the chief's office.

A man said, "Oh, there you are, Jack."

"Yeah. Here I am."

I had never seen him before.

"It's about time," he said. He was middle-aged and very un-dangerous-looking with a pleasant, slightly myopic smile and a fringe of dark hair surrounding his bald dome on all sides but the front. "We were going to leave without you," he added.

"Well, thanks for waiting," I said, wondering what this was all about. I looked behind me. I had come out of a 'porter, all right. But it was no model I had ever seen before. The design of the cabinet was different — lower, broader, with a larger window and no outside dials. The difference was not drastic: it might have been next year's model, say.

"It's just that we know you. You never were very punctual, Jack."

"I—uh—guess not. Say, is Doris going with us?"

"Naturally. She's outside." The man looked suddenly alarmed. "Jack," he said, "what's the matter with Doris?"

"Why, I—"

"I mean, the way she's been acting lately and all."

"I hadn't noticed."

Just then the door opened and Doris came in. I looked at her. I gawked. She was wearing the last thing I expected. She was wearing a duplicate of the costume I had in my hand. Although, as be-

fore, I couldn't vouch for the underthings.

"Jack Peters, isn't it?" she said. She sounded relieved.

"See what I mean?" the bald man whispered to me in an anxious voice.

"The Teleportation, Inc. repairman?" Doris said.

I nodded.

"Then maybe you can tell me what on Earth is going on. I dialed your office on the 'porter, and—"

"I know all about that," I said. "Save it for later." I was watching our bald friend, who was watching us. First he would look at Doris and then he would look at me and I was beginning to think he was beginning to think not only Doris but old Jack Peters as well had something wrong in the head.

"What are you carrying there?" Doris asked me.

I thrust my hands behind my back too late. "Why, uh—" I began, and then let Doris look at the collection of clothing.

"But I'm wearing it!" she squealed. "All of it."

"*All* of it?" I repeated. When she nodded, it somehow made me feel better. I turned to the bald man. He was still watching us. "Mr.—uh—he says we're going someplace with him," I said.

"My name," the bald man said.

I stared at him and shook my head. "Maybe it will come to me," I suggested.

He scowled. "What's the matter with you two? What is it?"

"Jack," Doris said. "Take me home."

That really exasperated the bald man. "You *are* home," he said. "This is your home. You've been living here almost a year. Me, I'm Philip Macreedy. Your Uncle Phil, Doris."

"My Uncle Phil died when I was seven years old," Doris told him. "I ought to know when my Uncle Phil died. And I only had one Uncle Phil. But," she added, looking at me strangely, "that was his name. Macreedy. My mother's brother."

"But he's dead," I said, unbrightly.

"Been dead for seventeen years," Doris insisted.

Philip Macreedy chuckled. "If this is some kind of practical joke, you two sure are carrying it all the way out. Is that all you've had time to do since you were married, play practical jokes? We hardly see you these days."

"Married?" said Doris.

"Married?" I said.

"To him?" Doris went on, pointing at me.

"So what the hell's wrong with me?" I wanted to know.

"It's the principle of the thing," Doris said. "We're not married and you know it. Don't you?"

"Yeah," I said.

Macreedy sighed. "It's beyond me," he admitted. "Way up and beyond me."

"Where were you going when you were waiting for me?" I asked him.

"To the police."

"The which?" I said.

"The police. Doris has an appointment with a Captain Duncan, don't you remember?"

"*I* don't," Doris said in a decisive voice.

"Now listen, you two," Macreedy said. "I don't know what this is all about, but I answered Duncan's call a while ago. Whatever it is, it's important to him. If you don't go down there, he's coming here. That's what he said."

"Maybe the police will know what's going on," I suggested to Doris. She looked at me doubtfully. She did not know what to say and, like a woman, she changed the subject entirely. She said:

"I'm not your wife, am I?"

"No," I said. I glared at Macreedy, who was smiling. "Not as far as I know," I added.

"Well, come on," Macreedy said.

Finally, Doris nodded. "Teleport?" I asked Macreedy.

"No. It's a nice day. Cold, but nice. We don't want to atrophy, do we?"

That sounded all right. Even the Teleportation, Inc. public relations department said that. Walk every now and then. Keep exercising. Do you good. Don't get soft.

"Shall we walk?" Macreedy went on.

I shrugged. Doris nodded. I opened a door, but it was the closet.

"That's all my clothing!" Doris shrieked. It was all her clothing, hanging on one side of the closet. It was all my clothing, hanging on the other side.

"Well, naturally," Macreedy said. "You live here, don't you. That's what I've been trying to tell you. Are you two quite sure you're all right?"

"Not at all," I said, which surprised him. Doris looked like she wanted to cry. I felt the same way, but I'm a man. Frustrated, they call it.

We went outside together, the three of us. I was beginning to look forward to this

interview with Captain Duncan of the police.

I should have, as the expression goes, stood in bed.

Captain Duncan's smoked glass door bore the legend: BURGLARY DIVISION. I began to wonder what had been burgled and by whom. I also began to doubt the logic of my original enthusiasm over meeting Captain Duncan.

Doris paused outside the door as two uniformed policemen strode by on some errand. "Jack—" Doris said, shaking her head.

I felt the same way. Uncle Phil Macreedy was all smiles, though. Not a worry in the world. The hale-fellow-well-met-extrovert type, if you liked that sort of thing. I wasn't sure. And something about the two policemen had bothered me.

"Those uniforms," Doris said.

Macreedy beamed. "The city's finest," he told us.

"What color were they?" Doris persisted.

"Midnight blue?" I offered.

Doris shook her head again. "They should have been."

I lit a cigarette, then turned around and walked away from Captain Duncan's door. "Dark *purple?*" I suggested, almost gagging on the words.

"Purple," Doris said. "Yes. But cop's uniforms aren't purple, are they? I'm right behind you, Jack. Let's get out of here."

Uncle Phil Macreedy was still beaming. "The latest thing," he told us.

The two purple-uniformed policemen came back down the corridor. They stood in front of us, making like twin Rocks of Gibraltar. One of them wagged a finger. "Uh-uh," he said. "Captain's expecting you."

Macreedy nodded enthusiastically. "Come on," he told us.

The three of us entered Captain Duncan's office. The two uniformed policemen remained lounging in the corridor. The only one who looked happy was Uncle Phil.

Captain Duncan was short and stocky with brush-cut hair. I was glad he wore plainclothes because the purple uniforms could be most disconcerting. "Mr. and Mrs. Peters," he said in a rasping voice which went with the brush-cut hair. He offered us chairs, of which there were two besides his own. Uncle Phil remained standing and didn't seem to mind.

"Not really," Doris pointed out.

"Not really what?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Peters. We're not married."

"No?" Captain Duncan looked at Uncle Phil. "Aren't these your nephew and niece? Your niece and her husband?"

"I assure you," said Uncle Phil, "they are."

"Well," Captain Duncan said, "some of the victims can identify them when the time comes. I want to thank you, Mr. Macreedy."

Uncle Phil waved a hand deprecatingly. "My duty to society."

I stood up and took a cigarette from Captain Duncan's large metal desk. The cigarette box was unmarked, but the white cigarette paper bore the legend, in small blue printing, *Paladins*. "Doris," I said, "do you smoke?"

She nodded and reached for the cigarette, but I shook my head. "Did you ever hear of a brand called *Paladins?*"

"There's no such brand."

Uncle Phil and Captain Duncan looked meaningfully at each other.

"These are *Paladins,*" I said. "And cops with purple uniforms. And you and me, husband and wife." I turned to Captain Duncan and asked, "Captain, exactly what did you want to see us about?"

"*Paladin* cigarettes," Doris mumbled.

Instead of answering, Captain Duncan flipped open a loose-leaf book on his desk and studied the contents. He did this for a few moments and then snapped the book shut, made a bridge of his hands and leaned his big chin on them. "If you plead kleptomania," he said abruptly, "I may be able to get you off easy."

I sat down again. I stood up. I suddenly had ants in my mental pants. "Plead which?" I gasped.

"Kleptomania. Burglary compulsion, you know."

"I never stole anything in my life!" I exploded.

Doris was still trying "*Paladin* cigarettes" for size. I think she missed the entire byplay.

"Jack, Jack," Uncle Phil said. "What's the use? It's for your own good. You can't get away with it indefinitely. I—I've declared my willingness to turn state's evidence on you."

"Look, Uncle Phil or whoever the hell you are," I flung at him. "I don't know what this is all about or what your game is, but if you let me call Teleportation, Inc., I'm sure I can straighten all this out. It's a case of mistaken identity, clear and simple. They'll know me at T. I. They'll iden-

tify me. I'm a repairman first class, and—"

"What," Captain Duncan asked me coldly, "is T. I.?"

"Why, Teleportation, Inc. The outfit which puts the 'porter units in every home, office, and factory."

Uncle Phil looked at Captain Duncan and shook his head. Duncan said, "We have 'porters, of course. But no Teleportation, Inc. There isn't one giant in the 'porter industry. There are several competing companies. There's 'Porter House, Ltd., and the Universal Teleportation Corporation of America, and American Telephone, Telegraph and Teleport, and a few others. Which one do you mean?"

I glowered and said nothing. I was getting the glimmerings of an idea, but it seemed so patently incredible that I hardly wanted to think about it, let alone say anything about it. And then Doris surprised me. She had been listening all along, after all. She said, "What are we supposed to plead kleptomania for?"

Captain Duncan nodded. "That's better," he said. He flicked a switch on his desk and said, "Miss Van Eyk, will you please come in and take this down? And incidentally, Miss Van Eyk, please tell officers Verneer, Stuyvesant and Stoeffels to remain on call for another hour or so, will you?"

Miss Van Eyk said she would and appeared a moment later in the doorway. She was a big blonde girl of obvious Dutch ancestry. She perched her large frame gracefully on a corner of Captain Duncan's desk and folded over the cover of a stenographer's notebook. "Don't take this yet, Miss Van Eyk," Captain Duncan said. "Mr. and Mrs. Peters, I'll read you a statement I've prepared. Miss Van Eyk will take it down. Then you'll sign it. All right?"

"I doubt it," Doris said under her breath.

Captain Duncan didn't hear her. He opened his loose-leaf again and began reading. "14 February 1978," he began. "Office of the Chief of Police, Burglary Division, Manhattan County, City and State of New Amsterdam—"

"New *what?*" I blurted.

"I said, 'City and State of New Amsterdam.' What's the matter, Mr. Peters?"

"*Paladin* cigarettes and now New Amsterdam," Doris wailed. "Jack—"

"A bunch of small 'porter outfits and cops in purple,"

I added for her. "Tell me, Captain, did you ever hear of New *York* City and *New* York State?"

Captain Duncan nodded. "Naturally. Everybody learns about it in high school history. After the English conquered New Amsterdam from the Dutch in the Seventeenth Century, they wanted to change the name of the city to New York, in honor of the King's brother, the Duke of York, I think. Is that what you mean?"

"That's what I mean," I said.

"But they didn't," Captain Duncan went on. "As I remember my history, the city fathers in the Seventeenth Century thought there was too much tradition associated with the name New Amsterdam, so they never changed it. That's why the city is still called New Amsterdam today. But shall we get back to the deposition?"

"Oh, sure," I said "The deposition."

Captain Duncan went on to read a long list of burglaries. In each case, jewelry was stolen. The list sounded suspiciously like a catalogue of the items I had found in the small suitcase in Doris' closet. The things which Doris said had been coming through the 'porter to her.

Miss Van Eyk was scribbling furiously. When she finished, Captain Duncan said, "Please type that in deposition form. The usual four copies." Miss Van Eyk unperched herself and departed. "Now, Mr. and Mrs. Peters, will you sign it so we can finish with this business?"

Doris looked at me. "Hell," I said, "no."

Captain Duncan looked surprised. Uncle Phil Macreedy looked hurt. "Captain," Doris said as only a woman could, "did anyone ever tell you your whole world was completely cockeyed?"

Uncle Phil clucked his tongue. "You see what I'm up against?" he asked Duncan. "They're deranged. Kleptomania and delusions."

I got up and said, "Since we're not going to sign anything, can we please go now?"

Captain Duncan ran large fingers through his brush-cut hair. "I don't see how that's possible. Your uncle has already signed a deposition. He's confessed for you. I was dictating the wording of that deposition, slightly changed, to Miss Van Eyk."

"He can't confess for us," I said. "We have nothing to

confess. Do you have any proof?"

Captain Duncan scratched his scalp through the brush-cut hair. Uncle Phil smiled and said, "I've already told you, sir. The victims can identify them. Positively. You see?"

"I hope so," Captain Duncan said. "For we have no other proof."

Just then Miss Van Eyk re-appeared in the doorway. "Here's the deposition, chief," she said, giving Duncan a sheet of stiff bond paper and several manifolds. He held it out to us with a fountain pen. I gave him my best indifferent laugh, but wasn't feeling indifferent. I was feeling plenty worried.

"We have no choice but to hold you," he said. "Miss Van Eyk, will you tell Stoeffels to come in here for the gentleman and get a matron for his wife?"

"You," I said, knowing now why people always said it in stories but realizing the knowledge was both academic and useless, "can't do this to us!"

Unfortunately, he could and he did. Doris' matron was an enormous woman in purple skirt, blouse and jacket. Her name was Miss van Rijn and she was very stolid and very Dutch. My guard, Stoeffels, was less enormous but no less certain. His fingers felt like a monkey wrench closing on my elbow.

"Bail?" I said. It took some time to recognize the timid voice as my own.

"It will be set," Captain Duncan assured me as Stoeffels led me outside to the corridor.

"But where," Doris, who now looked like a small appendage of matron van Rijn, wanted to know, "are we going to get the money?"

I shared my cell for the next three days with a taciturn giant named Strydom. He was not awaiting an indictment. He was in for disturbing the peace and would be out again presently so he could disturb the peace again. He seemed to be anticipating it with considerable enthusiasm.

I ran the whole thing through my mind about a dozen times a day. Each time I came up with the same fantastic answer, and each time I wished I hadn't thought about it at all. On the fourth day, Stoeffels came for me.

"All right, you," he said.

Strydom stood up and moved ponderously to the

bars. But Stoeffels shook his head and said, "The other one. Peters."

"That's me," I admitted. "At least, I think it is. Is that still my name today, officer? You never know around here."

"Very funny. Come on, pal. It's been posted."

"What's been posted?"

"Your bail."

"Now, who would go and do an absolutely crazy thing like that?"

"I wouldn't know," Stoeffels said as he opened the cell door. "Coming?"

I lunged outside before he could change his mind. Strydom looked envious.

Out front in the prison office, Doris was waiting for me. Matron van Rijn glared at her balefully, with no pun intended, as if bail had been a mistake in our case. Uncle Phil Macreedy was there, giving us his best we're-all-one-big-happy-family smile. I did not see Captain Duncan, and I wasn't sorry.

"All ready to go?" Uncle Phil demanded.

"Don't tell me you posted the bail?" I said.

He merely nodded and beamed.

"There must be some mistake."

"No mistake. I put up the bail and had you both released in my custody. Coming?"

"Coming," I said, and after we signed a bail release form —as Mr. and Mrs. Peters or nothing, Stoeffels insisted— Uncle Phil led us outside.

"Where are we going?" I said. "And no 'porter?"

"No 'porter, Jack. We'll walk."

The streets were virtually deserted. These days, few people walked or rode, particularly in the large cities. You teleported everywhere. Not Uncle Phil, though. This was the second time he'd vetoed using a 'porter, and I began to wonder about it. We didn't say much of anything while we walked. A cold wind moaned through the canyons of New York—make that New Amsterdam—and there were traces of snow on the ground.

"Give me teleporting any time," said Doris, who had apparently forgotten the fix teleporting had placed her in.

It was a long walk and we all were thoroughly chilled by the time we reached Macreedy's apartment. We didn't say a word as we went up in the elevator—which creaked and groaned from lack of use.

"I hope Hugo is home," Uncle Phil said at the door

of his apartment. "I don't have a key. I don't usually use the door. The 'porter."

"It wasn't my idea," I informed him.

He ignored that as he leaned on the door buzzer. As it turned out, Hugo was home. Hugo was a large man. He made Miss Van Rijn look like a peanut and made my old cell mate Strydom, at best, look like a medium-sized avocado. Hugo was almost seven feet tall. He had immense hands with spatulate fingers and a much-battered face which would stop not only a clock but a teleporter as well. What surprised me most was the battered face. I mean, I didn't think anyone would have been able to do it. Maybe they had knocked Hugo out first—say, with enough ether to demolish the central nervous system of a brontosaurus.

"These are my niece and nephew, Hugo," Uncle Phil informed him. "The ones I told you about? Who are not to leave the apartment without my permission?"

"Yes," said Hugo in an unexpectedly small voice, like a piano rendition of chopsticks issuing from the funnel of one of the old eighty-thousand-ton Cunard ocean liners.

"Oh, so that's how it is," I said. I hadn't entered the apartment yet.

Hugo grabbed my arm and did something. I flew into the apartment. It was almost as effective as teleporting.

"Yes," Uncle Phil said. "That's how it is."

He sat down. I sat down and so did Doris. Hugo remained standing, near the door.

"You don't look unintelligent," Uncle Phil told me. "I suppose you have begun to understand."

"I think so," I said.

Doris said nothing. She had a *Paladin* cigarette look on her pretty face, though.

"Parallel worlds," I offered Uncle Phil. "More than one Earth, identical but not quite. New York in my world. New Amsterdam here. Midnight blue cop's uniforms in my world. Dark purple here. Small variations. And two Uncle Phils."

"My Uncle Phil Macreedy died when I was a little girl," Doris sniffed.

"Exactly," I went on. "Small variations. Right, Uncle Phil?"

"Definitely, right. In this world, I'm still alive."

"And two Jack Peters," I said. "Two Doris Lorings. In this world they're married."

"Worlds existing in parallel

dimensions," Macreedy said. "Like interlocking soap-bubbles, you might say. Interdimensional, almost identical."

"Doris and Jack Peters are a couple of slick jewel thieves here, aren't they?" I asked.

"Yes, they are."

"Sooner or later, they thought they would get caught. Naturally, they didn't like it. And then they must have discovered something strange about their teleporter. You do have a teleporter in this apartment, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Teleportation," I mused. "Reducing physical entities to electrical impulses, and communicating them elsewhere. Despite the nearly perfect relay systems in the old telephones, it was inevitable that a certain percentage of wrong numbers cropped up, even with accurate dialing. Right again?"

"It's beyond me," Uncle Phil admitted. "You're the 'porter repairman."

"Yeah," I said. "Something was wrong with the circuits of your teleporter here. But it only worked on Jack and Doris Peters—*your* Jack and Doris Peters — and things they handled. Every man and woman has unique fingerprints, a unique retinal pattern, a unique electroencephalogram, and probably a unique electronic pattern when he's reduced to a series of electronic impulses by the 'porter. Your 'porter and the one in Doris' apartment on our world can send either one of the Jacks and either one of the Dorises and anything they handle through the interlocking dimensions of the parallel worlds. Isn't that right?"

"Yes," said Uncle Phil. "They discovered it quite by accident. They decided things were getting too hot for them here. They thought they could switch places with you and get away with it—sending the loot through first so they'd have something to live on. I played along with them. You see, we've always been a close family. They're my niece and nephew, after all."

"But what I don't understand," I said, "is why you posted our bail. Why make trouble for yourself? Because you ought to know we're going to make trouble."

"Not with Hugo here," said Uncle Phil. I didn't answer that one. I waited for him to go on. "I gave the police a deposition," he said, "implicating Jack and Doris in the burglaries. Only, it would not be them who answered for their crimes. It would be

you and this other Doris. Neat, isn't it?"

"Neat," I said. I felt like kicking his face in. I looked at Hugo. I sat there.

"The only trouble was," Uncle Phil said, "we're a close family. I like Jack and Doris. You're Jack and Doris, too. Almost identical, you know. I like you, too. Of course, my first allegiance is to them, but I saw no reason for two relatives of mine, even from a parallel world, to sit around a dreary prison waiting for their trial to come up. So I bailed you out. And don't worry, Jack boy. I'm going to hire the best lawyers. I'll get you off with a minimum sentence, if it's the last thing I do."

"Very nice of you, Uncle," Doris said, "except that we happen to be completely innocent. And while those two crooks go scot free, we pay for their crime." I thought she was going to cry, but she didn't. "You must feel very proud of yourself," she concluded.

Uncle Phil said he would do everything he possibly could. He was going out now to visit a lawyer, he added, heading for the teleporter in the corner of the room. Hugo would be a gracious servant provided we remained within bounds. Hugo had his orders, though, Uncle Phil warned us as he closed the 'porter door behind him. Then Uncle Phil disappeared, 'porting off to some lawyer's office. Hugo stared at us steadily with eyes the size of BB's.

I kept on looking at the teleporter. This was the one which had brought us here to New Amsterdam. This was the connecting link. If we could enter it and dial Doris' number, we'd go back to our own Earth.

If we could enter it. With Hugo watching us. If we could teleport from here to the moon—one was as impossible as the other.

It was our last chance, though. Hugo had the brawn, but lacked the brains. These could be supplied in sufficient quantity to keep us prisoners by Uncle Phil until our trial came up. But right now Uncle Phil was busy.

Doris' clothing, I thought. That was still unexplained. The extra set of clothing. If it puzzled me, it must have puzzled the other Jack Peters, because now I knew as much about this as he did.

"Doris," I said, "take off your shoes."

"Come again?"

"Your shoes. Give them to

me." A moment later, I was being watched by a puzzled, stocking-footed Doris and a belligerent Hugo. I turned to Hugo and said brightly, "Uncle Phil wants us to stay here, so we won't try and leave. Right?"

Hugo grunted something which sounded like you-better-not, but only a little.

"However," I went on, "we have a few items which we would like to send through the 'porter—"

"Jack," Doris pointed out, "these sets are different. I don't see any outside dials for freighting."

"Maybe there's a portable unit," I suggested, looking around the room. "We're planning to put them on next year's model ourselves." I found it, finally, in a cabinet, and held it up triumphantly. It was a small box with a dial on it.

"Is it all right if we send these shoes for repairs?" I asked Hugo.

He grunted what might have been well now.

"They sure need repairs," I said.

Doris, who didn't know what I had in mind, nevertheless nodded enthusiastically and said, "They certainly do, Hugo."

Eventually, Hugo nodded his great head. He stood by and watched with exaggerated care while I placed Doris' shoes tenderly inside the big 'porter, shut the door, and dialed Doris' home number on the portable dial. I took a deep breath, opened the 'porter door, and looked inside. Hugo grabbed my shoulder and held on, almost wrenching it out of joint. But the shoes were gone.

I looked at Doris and said, "I don't know if that will be enough."

"If you think I'm going to—"

"Yes," I said. "You are. Everything. If necessary. Please, Doris."

"I wish I knew why—"

"I can't tell you now."

She blushed. I wanted to kiss her when she said, "All right, Jack Peters. But turn around. And Hugo, too."

I turned around. Hugo did not. I promised myself I would bop him one when I got the opportunity.

"O.K.," Doris said finally. I turned to face her. She had gone into Uncle Phil's bedroom for a blanket. It was draped across her shoulders and fell like a tent in front of her, to her knees. Her face and throat were glowing pink.

The clothing—all of it,

bless her—was in a little pile at her feet. I picked it up and strode to the 'porter with it. Hugo made a head-scratching face. This was clearly beyond his ken. He had been given no orders on this.

I deposited all of Doris' clothing on the floor of the 'porter, shut the door, dialed the portable unit, and waited. I opened the door. The 'porter was empty.

"So far so good," I told Doris. "That ought to confuse them no end."

"Confuse who?" Doris said, confused.

"The other Jack and Doris. You watch. Any second now, they'll come through that 'porter."

Just then, something began to materialize in the 'porter. I gave a good imitation of a triumphant war-whoop.

But it was Uncle Phil.

"What's going on here?" he said, looking at Doris wearing a blanket.

Doris was going to say something, but I shook my head. She said nothing. "What are they up to?" Uncle Phil asked Hugo.

Hugo looked very embarrassed. He cleared his throat for declaiming. It sounded like the roar of the M. G. M. lion which, incidentally, Teleportation, Inc. purchased about a dozen years ago for its trademark.

And then something else began to materialize in the 'porter.

Make that someone. A couple of someones.

I blinked. So did Doris. Talking about this was one thing. Inventing pretty theories was easy. But seeing them in the flesh—

The other Jack and Doris.

Us, all over again.

They came into the room. They looked confused. We must have looked confused, too. "Listen," the other Jack said.

"About this clothing," Doris—the other Doris—said.

"Are you crazy, coming here?" Uncle Phil asked them. "Get back, before—"

Uncle Phil never finished the sentence. I drove my left fist into his stomach and my right into his face. He fell heavily and at once.

The other Jack Peters said his second word. He repeated, "Listen."

I was one step ahead of him. I was doing things. I plucked the blanket from Doris' shoulders and mumbled an apology. I got a quick glimpse of flashing white well-formed limbs, but I was too busy for more than that.

I dropped the blanket over Hugo's head and hit him in the belly with everything I had while he struggled with the woolen folds.

Everything I had was a right fist and a left fist. Hugo took them. Hugo offered nothing but his belly as resistance. Right and left fist went completely numb. Hugo went right on struggling with the blanket. And hollering bloody murder.

Someone jumped on me. It was the other Jack Peters. We fell alongside Uncle Phil. We rolled over and over, saying nasty words in each other's face. It was like cussing yourself out in the mirror. It was also like fighting with a carbon copy of yourself—exactly as strong, exactly as cagey, exactly as determined.

I looked up. The dressed Doris was pulling the undressed Doris' hair. The undressed Doris was trying to get room to haul off and slug her.

I stood up. The other Jack tripped me. Down I went. The other Jack ran for the teleporter, admiring one Doris with his eyes and grabbing the other one with his hand. "Let's get out of here!" he cried.

Then Hugo untangled himself.

"Get them!" I hollered. "They're trying to escape!"

Hugo flexed his muscles and got them. It wasn't pretty, but we didn't stay for the finale. While Hugo was in the process of getting them, the naked Doris and I entered the teleporter, which was crowded, dialed her number, and faded.

Back in her apartment, she was more than a little breathless. She forgot her state of undress until she saw my eyes. She ran to her closet and got a robe. By the time she came back with it, I was busy dismantling the 'porter.

"What are you doing that for?" she demanded.

"It's the only one," I said. "They can't come back here without it. You see, a bug in the circuits made all this possible—"

"But Jack?"

"Yes?"

"About that clothing?"

"I'm sorry I had to," I said. "I thought it would bring them on the double."

"No, I mean—"

"Forget about the clothing," I said. "Our doubles were a couple of crooked rats, but at least they had one good idea."

"What was that?"

"They married each other."

(Concluded on page 130)

RECRUITING OFFICER

By ALICE ELEANOR JONES

You've heard how Boy Scouts go around helping old ladies cross busy streets. Very admirable and all that—especially in this day and age when the good deed is a rarity. Well, if any member of Troop 39 reads this, we want him to know that what follows is strictly fiction and has absolutely no basis in fact . . . we hope!

SHE is pleased with me. I have sent Her seventeen recruits in the last term, and that is better than any of the others have done. I have not told Her about the eighteenth, and I shall not.

She is rewarding me with a whole term of rest and pleasure, and I shall enjoy it. I have earned it. Afterward She will transfer me to another territory, by way of variety. I preferred it where I was, but one does not tell Her what one prefers.

I was ready to tell Her once. I was even ready to fight Her, and if I had won I should have been in Her place, but it is not necessary now. I shall go to the new territory; I may find it diverting. But I should like to tell somebody about the eighteenth recruit. It is a story I often think about, and it is, in a way, a love story.

I seldom tell things; it is others who tell me. That is my value as a recruiter. People talk to me. I suppose that is because I have a sympathetic face and appearance. My appearances are always excellent.

During my last assignment I was grandmotherly, small and slight, with white hair and blue eyes and many wrinkles. I dressed forty years behind the times, and it became me—long gray dresses and high button shoes and Queen Mary hats and soft feathery shawls in lavender or light blue. My name was Mrs. Quimby.

I traveled a great deal, and people talked to me. They talked in streetcars and sub-

ways, in buses and trains and planes, and many of the things they told me I found useful. For my purpose, however, automobile trips were best of all. I often drove, and sometimes I gave rides to hitchhikers. I secured some of my best recruits in that manner. Young men. Oh, the beautiful young men, out on the highways of this world!

At the very end of my term I met the eighteenth recruit. It was pure dazzling luck—I have always been a lucky woman. All but once.

The evening began unpromisingly. I was driving along at random in the dark, in the rain and fog, and the road was lonely. I had not passed anyone for miles and no one had passed me, and the few houses were set well back. There was a boys' school up ahead, I had seen the sign: St. Martin's School for Boys, 20 miles. I began to be interested. How old were the boys, I wondered? We prefer them between sixteen and twenty, but it is not an inflexible rule. Perhaps a visit to St. Martin's—

I saw a light ahead, indistinct in the fog, and at that moment my left rear tire went flat. I was extremely annoyed. I could change a tire, but I disliked doing it and I rarely had to. Two of my best recruits were young men who had stopped to change a tire for me.

It was unlikely, however, that anyone would come by on this road in this weather, and so I got out, wrapping myself warmly against the rain, pulling the lavender shawl over the Queen Mary hat, and walked toward the light.

It was a garage—providential! I felt my spirits rise. Perhaps it was meant for me to stop here.

I went inside, and two men were there, working on the motor of a handsome car. I said, "If you please—" and one of them turned irritably and said, "Oh, for—"

Then he saw me and smiled shamefacedly. "Excuse me, Grandma. Where the—where did you come from?"

I explained my difficulty, and he said, "Okay, Grandma, we'll fix it. Just up the road, you said?"

"Not far, yes."

He grinned. "You couldn't have picked a better place to have a flat." He took my keys and went out at once—people did not keep Grandma waiting—and I stepped into the office.

At once I knew that my luck was running high. Two

The boy was ready for his journey into the unknown.

people were sitting there, a woman and a boy. The woman was comely and well dressed, slender and dark, a little less than forty, I thought, and the boy was beautiful.

I sat down in a chair across from them and looked at him. He was a tall boy, dark, and I judged him to be about seventeen. He had fine brown eyes with long eyelashes, and his features had that harmony of line which makes a face arresting at any angle. I willed him to turn his head, and he turned it, and I was right. From the side, too.

The woman smiled at me. "Isn't it a dreadful night?"

"Yes, dreadful!" I took the shawl down and adjusted my hat. "Very difficult driving."

The woman frowned. "And Johnny has to be back at school. Spring vacation, you know—over today—and we started so late—"

I said courteously, "Your son?"

She smiled again, at the boy and at me. Proudly—she had a right to be proud of that boy. "Yes. Our name's Mathews. Johnny goes to St. Martin's."

I had wondered how old they were. It did not matter now. All my attention was given to Johnny. "A senior, surely?" I said, and he blushed a little but did not speak. His skin was surprisingly fair and very clear. "And my name is Quimby, Mrs. Henry Quimby."

In Mrs. Mathews' smile one saw a likeness to the boy. "I'm happy to meet you, Mrs. Quimby. No, Johnny graduates next year. Darling, go out and see if they're nearly through."

I did not want him to go. I said quickly, "Oh, I am afraid they are not, and one of them has gone to change my tire. I am sorry; that may delay you further."

The boy stood up—he was unusually tall and well made—and now he sat down again. "They don't know how long it'll take, anyway," he said. "The carburetor's busted. We had to be towed."

His voice was deep, but not quite so deep as it would be when he was fully grown. I judged it would go about two notes lower. Boys' voices are very appealing, just after they change.

I said, "That is too bad. And they cannot tell at all how long it will be?"

Mrs. Mathews said, "They thought about an hour, but we've been here that long already. We telephoned the school; I hoped they could

send the station wagon for Johnny."

"And they could not?"

She shook her head. "Andy's sick, and they're shorthanded. They said not to worry about being late, and if we can't get the car fixed soon to call again and one of the masters will come." She smiled. "But that's enough about our troubles. Where were you bound for?"

That was hardly her affair, but travelers always ask these questions and I am never at a loss for an answer. I said tranquilly, "I was going back to the city. I have just been to St. Martin's myself, returning my grandson."

Johnny looked interested. "Maybe I know him. What's his name?"

The question did not bother me. "Smith." There is always a Smith.

Johnny grinned. He had good teeth, white and even, and a sweet mouth. "Charlie or Henry or Joe? I know them all."

"Henry. He was named after my husband."

We were silent for a minute and Johnny took out a package of cigarettes and offered me one. Man of the world. I shook my head, and his mother shook hers, smiling ruefully at me, and I knew she was thinking, I don't like him to smoke, but what can one do?

I did not agree with her on that; I liked to watch Johnny smoke. He inhaled seriously and let the smoke drift out through his nose—a good nose, straight, with fine flaring nostrils.

Mrs. Mathews said suddenly, "Johnny, is your hair still wet?" and the boy ran his fingers through it. "Not much."

I should have liked to do that myself. He had crisp brown hair, a warm chestnut brown, cut short, and the dampness had made it a little curly.

His mother said, "I don't want you to take cold." She turned to me earnestly. "Johnny's a delicate boy."

Blushing, Johnny said, "Oh, *Mother*, for—"

My sympathies lay entirely with him. Mothers who talk like that, and a surprising number of them do, should learn better. I looked at the boy more closely. If he were delicate he would not make a good recruit. He did not look delicate to me. His color was good, though so fair, and his eyes were bright, and he looked muscular enough, and he moved well. A fine strong boy.

I said, "Johnny looks like a

strong boy to me," and he gave me a grateful look.

His mother smiled. "Well, I suppose he is, really. It's just that he gets so many colds."

Johnny inhaled angrily and put out the cigarette. "Not so many."

Only colds? I felt entirely happy again.

She could not let the subject drop. "We had to walk all the way up that long drive to the house, to use the phone. I had a hat and boots, but Johnny won't wear either—you know how boys are—and his feet—"

He gave her a patient look. "My feet are fine. Shall I go out and see how the car's doing?"

"Yes, darling, do that."

He did not have to, after all. The garage man came in, the one who had spoken to me before, and said, "Your car's ready, Grandma, out front," and gave me the keys.

I said, "Thank you, young man, that was very quick. And what do I owe you?"

He waved his hand. "Oh, forget it. Any time I can't do a favor for a nice old lady—"

I insisted a little, as I always did, but he would not be persuaded. A surprising number of things were done for Mrs. Quimby for nothing.

Mrs. Mathews said, "And our car, is it—"

He shook his head and said, "Sorry, lady, another hour at least, maybe more," and went out.

She frowned. "Oh, dear! We'd better call the school again. Johnny, will you—"

"Sure." He stood up, and I admired him again. Perfect all over.

I said, "Wait, Johnny. Mrs. Mathews, I just had an idea. I can take Johnny to St. Martin's. I should be glad to do it."

They both looked at me. Johnny said, "Hey—" and Mrs. Mathews said, "Oh, we couldn't think of—it's nearly twenty miles, and entirely out of your way."

I smiled. "What are a little time and distance to an old lady? I should be delighted to take Johnny. Perhaps I can even have another short visit with Henry, if he has not gone to bed. Henry is my favorite grandson."

Mrs. Mathews looked pleased and a little flushed. She was really an extremely pretty woman. A handsome family. "Oh, that *would* relieve my mind! Then Johnny wouldn't have to sit in this drafty office and maybe catch a—"

"Mother."

She said rather wistfully,

"Perhaps I could come along, and you could drop me on the way back."

Before I could find a suitable way to say that I did not think it advisable, Johnny spoke, a little impatiently. "You don't have to, Mother. I can go by myself."

She smiled. "You're afraid I'll cry when I leave you! But I promised I wouldn't. All right, darling, I'll stay here."

I stood up. "Then it is settled. Do you want to call the school first, Johnny, and tell them you are on your way?"

Mrs. Mathews said, "Oh, that won't be necessary. Mrs. Quimby, this is really terribly kind of you. I don't know how to—"

"That is quite all right. Oh, by the way—" I took out my wallet and passed her my driver's license and insurance card and several other cards of identification. "You do not know me, after all, and perhaps these will—" I laughed a little. "You are trusting me with your most precious possession, you know!" I believe in doing things with punctilio.

She hardly looked at the cards; she seemed embarrassed. "Oh, that isn't at all necessary, Mrs. Quimby."

Johnny said earnestly—the darling!—"Heck, no."

He said good-bye to his mother then, and allowed her to kiss him, and as I watched them I felt almost sorry for her. That beautiful boy!

He said as we went out the door, "I'll call the garage as soon as I get there, and then you can call me back when they get the car fixed, so I'll know you're okay."

A thoughtful boy, gentle-mannered. I liked that.

She said, "All right, Johnny. And thanks again, Mrs. Quimby."

Johnny frowned a little at my car. "He's got it pointed the wrong way."

I said calmly, "So he has," and turned it around.

My car was a convertible, and Johnny was surprised at that. He said, "I wouldn't have thought you—" He stopped, and even in the dark I knew he was blushing. A darling boy, to blush like that.

I like a convertible; it attracts the kind of hitchhikers one wants. Young men. I said, "Oh, old ladies can have convertibles, too! The rain has stopped, I think; that is just fog on the windshield. Want the top down, Johnny?"

"Hey, could we?"

"If you will not take cold."

"I don't get many colds. My mother just—she worries."

"Mothers do. I worried over

my boys. My girls, too. If you will just push that button on the—"

"I know how . . . Hey, I like it this way!" The air was damp but not cold, and he leaned his head back, looking up at the fog. "I think it's going to clear up."

"Perhaps it will." The fog did seem to be lifting a little. I hoped the moon would come out, so that I could see Johnny better.

We rode for a little while in silence, and then I shivered and said, "I am rather cold, after all. There is a thermos in the glove compartment, Johnny, coffee. Paper cups, too. Would you—"

"Sure. You want the top up?"

"No, just the coffee."

"Okay." He took it out and unscrewed the cap, and I stopped the car. He poured the coffee neatly. He had good steady hands, and I liked that, too. But he poured only one cup.

"But, Johnny, surely you want some?" I held my breath. He must drink it, it is always easier when they do. I do not like to hurt any of them, and I did not think I could bear to hurt Johnny.

He said, "Well—sure, I guess so," and I breathed again. He smiled and said, "Thanks, Mrs. Quimby," and drank. "This is good and—"

I thought he had been about to say, "hot." As he drooped forward I took the cup from his hand before it spilled. I poured the rest of the liquid carefully back into the thermos and crumpled up the paper cups and put everything into the glove compartment again.

I pushed the boy back gently so that he would be more comfortable, and he was limp under my hands. I started the car again and turned it around. He was not unconscious. The drug does not do that; it makes one sleepy, only half there, and very susceptible to questioning. He sat quiet, his eyes half-closed, and for a little while I did not talk to him.

I had one bad moment when my car passed the garage again, but no one was outside to notice. I would have turned off before if I could, but there was no road. I turned as soon as I saw one and pointed for home. I drove fast.

It was fortunate my term of duty here was over, else I should have had to acquire another appearance and another car and another place to live. This was not like the hitchhikers. I was seen, and my car

was seen, and perhaps even the license noted. I was glad Johnny and I could go back together. I did not want to send him, as I had sent the others; I wanted to take him.

The fog was clearing, and the moon was trying to come out, and I could see the boy's face more plainly. We have a word in our language which I cannot translate adequately. It means fair young thing, but more than fair and more than young, and that was Johnny. I thought, Oh, I *am* a lucky woman!

I spoke to him, then, and he spoke to me. As I drove I asked him questions, and he answered them all in a drowsy voice. I said, "Open your eyes, Johnny," and he opened them slowly. I wanted to see those eyes again—dark, liquid and dark, dreamy, and the eyelashes so heavy you could hardly lift them, Johnny.

I learned everything about that boy. I learned that he was sixteen and the only son of his mother, and she a widow. They were well-to-do and lived in an apartment in the city. Johnny had been going to St. Martin's for three years and had good grades—he was not a stupid boy, Johnny—and was going to Princeton. I thought, Poor young man! You will never see Princeton.

Johnny liked to play football and swim; he was on both teams at St. Martin's. He collected stamps and coins and belonged to two clubs and had correspondence with other collectors. He liked to make things and had made a radio once that could get London and Paris. He liked to drive his mother's car; she had let him get his license this year and had promised him a car of his own when he was eighteen. He said gravely, "I'm nearly seventeen now. I can have the car next summer. I think I'll get a convertible."

Johnny wanted to be a doctor and was going to take a pre-medical course at Princeton. His father had been a doctor; he had died two years ago. Johnny's voice trembled when he spoke of his father, and he moved his head restlessly and tears glittered on his eyelashes but he did not wipe them away.

Johnny loved his mother very much, and he was patient with her when she worried about him. He was all she had, after all, and he realized that. He said, in his deep boy's voice, "My mother's okay. She's—my mother's okay."

Johnny had a girl. I was careful to question him about

that; I wanted to see how mature he was. It was a normal thing—a steady girl, serious enough for the moment, but obviously not for long. A normal boy. I had not really doubted that, but I had to make sure.

We were nearly home now, and there were only a few more questions. "Johnny, are you sick very often?"

He almost smiled. "No, not often, just colds. My mother told you."

"What diseases have you had?"

He named them all, the usual childhood illnesses. "Oh, and I was in the hospital twice, once for a broken leg and once for appendix." He added thoughtfully, "I didn't like it."

I smiled. "No, I imagine it was not pleasant. Your heart, Johnny, is it strong?"

He looked puzzled. "My heart? Sure, I never had any trouble with it."

"That's good." That was very good. "Johnny, are you a nervous boy?" It was vital to know that, though I was more likely to learn it by observation than by questioning. Sometimes the nervous ones go mad.

Johnny laughed drowsily. "Me? Heck, no!"

I judged that perhaps he was, a little. A sensitive boy, I thought, but not excessively so. Well balanced.

There was nothing else to ask him. We had reached my apartment building, and I took his arm gently and said, "Come, Johnny, come in with me," and he said, "Yes, Mrs. Quimby," and came.

I took him up in the self-service elevator. We met no one; I had never met anyone but the manager since I lived there, except the time old Mr. Dow in the apartment up the hall fell asleep with his cigar and set his bed afire. The entire floor was filled with smoke, and the firemen came, and everyone had to come out and be counted. I had complete privacy, and that was one reason I chose that place.

Johnny was docile still, but as the elevator approached my floor I noticed that his eyes were beginning to look less blank. The drug does not last long.

I hurried him into my apartment and locked the door and breathed easier. My walls were sound-proof. Ostensibly I was a musician, and I had the sound-proofing done quite early in my occupancy, out of consideration for the other tenants.

Johnny stood in the middle

of my living room. His eyes were almost normal now, and he looked frightened, and he trembled. He said, "What—why did you—"

Now. It is an exciting moment when I allow my disguise to slip away from me, the drab garment which I have put on to make me look like a creature of this world, and reveal myself as I am. I did it for Johnny and said, "Look, darling, am I not beautiful?" and he looked.

Most of them scream, but some let themselves faint rather than look at me, and that was what Johnny did. He fell at my feet without a sound.

I regarded him sadly, thinking, There is a curious lack of perception in the people of this world. I can see beauty in them, although they are so different from anything I have known. Why, then, can they not see beauty in me? I am accounted beautiful in my tribe, the most beautiful of all except the Queen. The Queen, for Whom I am a recruiting officer. The tribe, the world, the manless world, for whom I recruit men. *The male.* We desire it, in whatever form it comes.

Quickly I went to my closet and took out the chair and the machine and began to prepare the boy for the journey, touching him gently, for I loved him. I, of course, do not need the machine, I can go and come as I choose, just as I can take any shape I choose, or learn any language, or assume any manners, but the recruits need it. I did not connect it at once. I wanted to give Johnny a chance to calm himself a little, and I wanted to talk to him again.

It was fortunate, perhaps, that he had let himself faint; I could not have borne to hurt him. I lifted him easily with two of my hands and bound him to the chair, at wrist and ankle and chest and thigh, firmly but not too tightly. He must be able to move a little.

He looked so white that I was concerned and felt for his pulse. It was weak and slow, but it was there. I brought a basin of cold water and a cloth and wiped his face gently, seeking to bring him to himself.

He stirred and opened his eyes, and cried out and struggled frantically in the chair. He was a fine strong boy. When he saw that he could not possibly loosen the bonds, he grew quieter—he was a sensible boy, too—and looked piteously at me and then at the machine. His eyes had reason in them, and I was

happy, because now I knew he would not go mad. He said, "Who—are you?" and I was pleased. Some of them say, "What are you?"

I told him my name and the name of my tribe and my world, but I did not know how much of it he understood.

He said then, "What's—that?"

"The machine, darling. It will not hurt you."

He shivered and said, "Let me go. Please let me go!"

I said, smiling, "No, little one, I love you," and he shut his eyes again and cried, sobbing and shaking, his eyelashes dark and heavy with tears.

I said lovingly, "I am sorry you are so frightened, darling. I could be Mrs. Quimby again, or anything you would like, but I need all my hands and eyes to operate the machine. And besides, you must get used to me. This is the form I have, just as yours is the form you have, and we are both beautiful . . . Do not cry, little one, do not cry any more."

So I spoke to him soothingly and stroked his hair. At my touch the boy turned paler still and shuddered and was sick. I held his head pityingly, trying to help him, and after a little it was over, and he moved his head violently and I let him go and took the basin away.

I said, "Are you better now, sweetheart?"

He said faintly, "What are you going to do to me?"

"Nothing to hurt you, I promise. Do not be afraid."

I stroked his hair again, and he shrank away from me, and I thought it troubled him that he could not cover his face. He said, "Don't—please," and reluctantly I took my hand away.

I brought him water to drink, but he said, "No, thanks." Then I brought wine and offered it to him, saying, "Drink, little one, it will warm you," but he closed his eyes and turned his face away and said again, "No, thanks." Even in despair Johnny had gentle manners.

I thought perhaps he had never tasted wine and did not like it, and so I said, "Is there anything you want, my darling? Tell me what it is and I will bring it to you."

He looked at me and said, "Nothing. Let me go."

"No, little love, never."

The boy was quiet, then. He did not cry or struggle any more, but he shook, a steady trembling that went to my heart, and he coughed and

sighed. He was very cold. His face was no longer beautiful, but it was beautiful to me, because I loved him. His eyelids looked heavy, and they were stained violet, like the delicate skin beneath them, and his mouth drooped with great sadness. He spoke little, and when he spoke he said, "Please," or sometimes, "Oh, God, please."

They often called on their god, but I had never observed that he helped them.

The boy coughed again, and so did I. I became aware of something—a bitterness in the air, a scent of something.

He spoke again, and I forgot it. He said in a tired slow voice, "Please let me go. I'm so—" He shuddered but did not say it: *I'm so frightened.* He never said it; he was a brave boy, Johnny.

I wiped his poor face gently and said, "Do not be frightened, little one, little angel, little love!" and kissed him tenderly and caressed his poor hands. He had fought so hard that his wrists were chafed and bleeding, but I did not think he knew it.

He coughed and twisted away from me, but slowly, as if he were tired, and his eyes closed. Poor fair young thing! He had struggled and cried and pleaded and been sick, and now he did not know what else to do.

"I said, "Let go, my darling, let yourself sleep again. It will do you good."

He moved a little and said, "Mother — *Mother!*" in a breaking voice, and fell forward against the bonds, and I knew it was time to take him with me.

It requires considerable time and care to connect and adjust the machine, and I had barely set about it when I began to cough violently, and my eyes stung. I looked, and smelled, and it was familiar. Smoke, a little haze of it, drifting into my room.

The boy stirred and coughed, and I worked faster, remembering the excitement before, and the firemen. I wondered if old Mr. Dow had forgotten his cigar again. I must finish quickly, so that we might both be away before—

There were voices in the hall, a number of them, and my eyes were stinging too much to see the machine properly, and people were pounding at the door. "Mrs. Quimby! Are you in there?"

Someone said, "Maybe she's not home," and someone else, "Can't take a chance. Mrs. *Quimby!*"

My luck had run out. I

might have gone away at once, of course, but I could not bear to leave Johnny while there remained any chance of taking him with me. If I answered them and came out with them, they would be satisfied, and later I could come back to Johnny. But my heart ached to leave him in danger.

I did the only thing I could. I lifted the boy, chair and all, and the machine, and took them into the bedroom. Someone called, "All together now, we'll break the—" and someone else said, "Never mind, I have the master key." It turned in the lock.

The boy was coughing badly, but there was no way to silence him, short of hurting him, and I could not do that. They were coming in. Coughing myself, I became Mrs. Quimby again and stepped out of the bedroom.

They were very solicitous of me, the manager, and the firemen, and the policeman, and they all talked at once—I learned that it had indeed been old Mr. Dow — and coughed, and issued directions, making a good deal of noise, and I think I might have gone safely out the door if the boy had not cried out sharply, *"Mother! For the love of God, Mother, she's going to burn me!"*

It was quite loud; there was no mistaking it. They went in quickly, all but the policeman, who looked at me strangely and blocked the outer door. I could have dealt with him, but it no longer seemed to matter. I was concentrating on something.

They brought the boy out gently. He was conscious, but he could not walk alone. His beautiful eyes in their deep violet shadows turned to me at once, and he seemed amazed that I was Mrs. Quimby again. He said faintly, "She was—she— Maybe I dreamed it."

I thought, That would be wise of you, Johnny, not to tell them everything. Perhaps it would be wiser still to convince yourself that much of what you remember was a dream. I withdrew my attention from him and went back to concentrating.

One of the firemen who was supporting Johnny looked at me grimly and then at the poor hurt wrists and said, "You didn't dream those, kid, or the straps, or the—" He coughed again. "Joe, go in and get that thing."

I thought, The machine, you mean. I am blowing up the machine. I am concentrating on blowing it up, and it will

be well for Joe if he is not holding it.

We went out quickly—it did blow up, I heard it, the small puff they make, not loud, before Joe could even reach the bedroom door—and the rest does not matter.

Johnny, I assume, was restored to his mother and St. Martin's, and though I allowed the policeman to take me to his police station I naturally did not remain there. I remember thinking that he would have made rather a good recruit, though older than we like, but the speculation was purely academic, since the machine was gone.

When I returned to the Tribe, She was pleased with me. She did not even mind the loss of the machine. The seventeen had given Her and the others much pleasure, and, as is the custom, they had saved one of the best for me.

The best was Johnny. I think that all my life I shall remember Johnny. That fair young thing, with his gentle manners and his brave heart!

I intended to ask the Queen for him, and She would have had to let me have him. If She had not, I should have challenged and fought Her for him, and I should have been Queen, or dead.

Johnny . . . Sometimes—it is treason against the Queen and my own heart—but sometimes I am almost glad that Johnny escaped me.

They are all like Johnny at first—beside themselves with fright. The cowardly ones cringe and offer to do anything we ask if only we will not hurt them. The stupid ones try to kill themselves at once, and usually they succeed. But the brave ones, the intelligent ones, the stubborn ones—they keep themselves alive in the hope that they may escape us, and when they find that they cannot, the strong ones adapt themselves and learn to love us, in the brief time they have, and the sensitive ones lose all heart, and will not eat or move or speak, and they die.

Johnny was brave and intelligent, but I wonder whether he was strong enough to be stubborn. He might have pined for his home and his mother, and died of sorrow.

I think about it sometimes, and I wonder. Johnny . . . and old Mr. Dow . . . and my luck . . . and something else. Perhaps the entire issue was taken out of my hands. Or perhaps the issue was never in doubt. Johnny called on his god when he had no strength left. Perhaps Johnny's god helped him.

THE END

Human life from a machine—what would be its destiny?

THIS IS MY SON

By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

A set of odd circumstances prevented John Temple from seeing his long-awaited son during the first six years of its life. But the time finally arrived when he was free to display the natural affection of a father for his boy—only to learn that naturalness had nothing at all to do with it!

TEMPLE had his neck saved several times by the counsel of the older and wiser Mike Murchison. Temple would have a couple of drinks after hours—just enough to sharpen the yearning—and then Murchison would find him in his room throwing socks and shirts into a bag, getting ready for the next copter out.

The dialogue usually went something like this: Temple would turn with a snarl and

say, "Now before you start—I'm telling you—keep your long nose out of my business!"

Murchison would sit down and light his pipe and answer, "Why I wouldn't tell you what to do—not for the world."

"Then don't start. I want to see that boy of mine and nothing's going to stop me."

"Not even the fact that your contract's voided if you jump your job and run back to the States?"

"Damn my contract! A man can take just so much. I've got a son five years old and I've never seen him."

"Oh, yes you have. You've had him right here in this room more than once—on video."

"Sure—on video! A picture on a screen!"

"And that's a mighty pretty wife I saw when you called them last time."

"You're damned right. And that's why I'm heading home!"

Murchison would suck at his pipe. "Of course, it won't be so bad—as long as you're not depending on that severance pay to bring him up and send him through college—to make him a physicist like yourself."

"The hell with college! We'll go fishing. That'll be more fun."

"Yeah," Murchison would say, "you won't be able to get another contract—not from anybody—when the word gets out that you broke this one."

At this point, Temple would usually wad a shirt up and throw it viciously into his bag. "Why do they have to make it so damned tough on a man? Would the world collapse if I took a week off to see my family?"

"Well, no, not exactly. But the particular work you're doing would have to stop. It's your specialty, you know."

Then Temple would pick the whole bag up and throw it across the room and Murchison would know everything was going to be all right for a while and say, "It won't be much longer, son. I know how these South American jungles are on a man—especially one with a family waiting for him. But just think what you'll have when your contract's up and this blasted solar heat depot is finished. A citation for your loyal services; a two-year vacation; all the money you need. It's worth waiting for, man. You're doing your wife and son credit by sticking it out."

After that, they would have a couple more drinks and

Temple would take a pill and go to sleep. Usually, to dream about John Temple Jr.

He had met Jill in 2034, his last year in M. I. T. But he had insisted upon waiting a year to be married because it would not be until a year after that before they could afford the children he wanted.

Jill had found humor in his resolution. She said, "But darling, we can get married now and wait a year to have children. Don't you want me as soon as you can get me?"

"Of course I do, angel, but a marriage without children is just—well, no marriage at all. You understand that, don't you?"

As a matter of fact, Jill didn't understand it at all. Such a philosophy seemed strange to her in this push-button age. Twenty years earlier, perhaps yes, but planned parenthood was an accomplished fact now. With the wonderful new discoveries—with the new knowledge of genes and basic fibers, and elemental magnetic cohesions, even the sex of a child could be arranged.

But Jill was in love with her man. So much so that just about anything he said was all right with her. So they waited and were married the week after John signed his first contract.

It was a contract for work on a local job, in New Mexico, and living quarters accommodated wives and children, so they went down there to start their family.

They didn't have time for much else, because John's work was so exacting and the hours so long. Nor was it an easy life, but John always had that great day to look forward to—the day the doctor told Jill the wonderful news.

But the day was rather stubborn in coming. As month after month went by and Jill had no word for him, John began to worry. Could something be wrong with him—or with Jill?

Old Doc Adams checked and assured them that this was not the case. They were both disgustingly healthy and well able to have children. Then why hadn't it happened? The doctor could only shrug and say that those things took time. Or at least, in certain cases they took time, and it began to look as though this was one of the cases.

All Doc Adams could say was to keep trying. He said this cheerfully enough and seemed full of confidence, but as time continued to pass,

even his confidence got slightly shopworn.

Jill was miserable. She wanted more than anything in life to give John a son because she knew that was what he wanted more than anything in life. Yet nothing happened.

Then came the day John got his South American offer. It was a fabulous one: a contract any young physicist would have given ten years of sweat and effort to procure and it came to John two years after he graduated from M. I. T.

There were conditions attached — conditions John would not have even considered if things had been different; but as he said to Jill: "Looking at it one way, a six-year contract isn't so bad, even with the seclusion clause."

She could not understand at first. "I think it's abominable! Forcing a man to remain separated from his wife for six years!"

"They aren't being arbitrary. It's necessary, really. You see each scientist is assigned a separate project with a time schedule, each project interlocking at the end of six years. The cost is enormous and every man has to keep his end going or there's hell to pay."

"What if somebody dies? Do they prop him up in his laboratory and force him to keep working?"

"Each man has to pass the most rigorous physical examination imaginable. Then he is insured for five million dollars; the aggregate in premiums is staggering, but they figure it's worth it."

"Maybe you can't pass the physical, dear."

"I've already passed it." After the slight pause while Jill looked at him in blank surprise, he said, "Can you beat it? I can pass the toughest examination they can dish out, and yet—" He spoke bitterly.

Jill put her arms around him. "Darling. I know what you're thinking, and it isn't your fault! I'm the one that's all wrong. It's got to be me!"

He shrugged. "I guess it doesn't matter which of us is off the beam."

Jill was almost in tears. "If it were only fifty years ago. Just a measly fifty years!"

"How would that help?"

"In those days there were more babies than they knew what to do with. There was such a thing as adoption."

John shook his head. "It

wouldn't be the same. Not our own son. Somebody else's kid."

"But—"

John got up and took a quick turn around the room. "As long as things are—well, the way they are, there's no reason why I shouldn't go to South America and set us up for life. There aren't many jobs around where a man can make enough to retire on a single contract."

Jill understood then, and wondered how she could have been so dense. John was willing to leave her for six years. If she was able to give him a son, it would be different. Then wild horses couldn't have dragged him away. But so long as he would be leaving only a wife—

After her heart broke a little, she stiffened her chin and said, "I think you're right, darling. You would be very foolish to pass up such a good opportunity . . ."

John had been in South America only four months when the wire came. *Our son due in five months. Congratulations. Love. Jill.*

First there was the shock of it. Then the elation. After that, John began thinking sanely enough to wonder about the manner in which Jill had sent the message. By wire! Of all the antiquated methods of communications! She could have telephoned. She could have videoed down and told him personally on a private band. But to send a wire. Why hadn't she just stuffed the message in a bottle and trusted the ocean currents?

He videoed home immediately, but Jill was out and he was greeted by Sarah, the maid they'd hired before he'd left the States. Sarah was pretty cold and formal about the whole thing. She didn't know when Jill would be home; didn't know where she could be reached; didn't seem to care.

John flared like a hot crater and reminded Sarah that she was expendable. Sarah sniffed and suggested he start expending. Any man who regarded his wife only as a breeding machine—

The light dawned and John realized what a selfish heel he'd been. That was the first strenuous effort Murchison had to make to keep him on the job. Murchison succeeded, but only after personally contacting Jill and begging her to give John a chance to square himself.

John talked to her on a private video band and did such a good job he had her

crying in five minutes. In ten minutes he was crying himself and five minutes later all the bad years had been washed away.

There was a little trouble at the birth, it seemed. John wasn't informed until forty-eight hours afterward, when his son was in an incubator and Jill was beamed down to him from her bed at home.

That was the second time he almost flew the coop and got himself blacklisted from pole to pole. Again it was Murchison who saved him.

The first time he was allowed to see his son, lying snug in Jill's arms, he got so hooting drunk, Murchison spent all the following night checking his work for error, and John spent the next night thanking him. After all, he needed his job now. There was his son to be considered.

Finally, after ten thousand years by Temple's calculation, his contract expired. He was a free man with Murchison clapping him on the back and saying, "Well now, old man. Wasn't it well worth the waiting?"

It had been. He thanked Murchison for all he'd done, and then there was nothing to do but curse the pilot for being so slow; for not ramming the old passenger jet right out of her skin.

And home.

He hadn't told Jill of his exact arrival time, wanting it to be a surprise. But the surprise was his as he walked through the front gate of the place Jill had bought three years before and saw the child playing in the yard.

Temple stopped and stared. John Temple, Jr. The video shots hadn't done him justice. A beautiful, curly-haired, great-eyed child who seemed to give off an aura of pure perfection.

Temple advanced toward him almost on tiptoe, as though moving toward a shrine. When he drew close, the boy looked up suddenly, but he had the composure of one far older. He smiled quietly and held up his arms and said, "Welcome home, Father."

Then Temple was holding him and Jill was running from the house. "John! Darling! Why didn't you let us know? We'd have met you!"

He freed one arm and caught her in it, grinning like a half-wit. "I wanted it this way, angel. A working man coming home to his little family."

"We're delighted, Father,"

John, Jr. said quietly. He spoke with complete sincerity, however, and Temple drew him even closer.

Temple said, "Listen here, young, fellow. Don't you think *Father* is a little formal? How about *Dad?*"

John, Jr. glanced at his mother as though happily asking permission. She nodded slightly and only now, did Temple catch that little worried look in her eyes; the look that was to puzzle him through the months, but for which there was apparently no explanation.

A heavenly week later, after Jill had said—for possibly the hundredth time—"Darling, I'm so glad you love him—that you're—satisfied with him," Temple frowned slightly and spoke what had been in his mind on the former occasions.

"Look, Jill, I—well, I suppose it's just my imagination, but is something bothering you?"

He was sure she colored slightly. "Why, darling! What a question! What could possibly be bothering me?"

"I can't think of anything. That's why I want you to tell me. I know it's been a long time. We practically have to get acquainted all over again."

"There's nothing, John—nothing. I'm—I'm wonderfully happy."

"But you're on edge—I feel a tension in you."

"But that's absurd."

"I suppose so, but at least a hundred times, you've told me how glad you are I'm satisfied with him—that I love him. Good Lord! What reason would I have not to? Doesn't it follow that a father is satisfied with his own son—especially a son like Junior?"

"Of course—of course. I guess it's just been so long that—"

She had no time to finish because John, Jr. came to where they were sitting in the backyard and Temple's thoughts and words were all for him.

The blow came suddenly, without warning, as terrible things usually do. Temple was in the bank one morning, transacting some business, when he looked up and saw Doc Adams standing at the counter beside him. Temple pushed out his hand and said, "Doc — Doc Adams! Good Lord! I thought you'd retired and gone on a farm up in the northwest years ago!"

The old medic peered through his glasses a moment. "John Temple! Of all people.

Thought you were in South America."

"I was, but my contract ran out."

"Well, it's certainly a pleasure seeing you. I just dropped back to town for a few days to clear up some details on a property sale. That old house of mine. So you're back in the States again."

"You bet. Had to rush back and see that son of mine!"

Doc Adams looked blank. "A son? No! Well, congratulations. It happened at last, eh?"

It was Temple's turn to look blank. "What are you talking about? You act as though you're surprised."

"I am. I'd about given up hope for you two. So you have a baby!"

"Not a baby, Doc," Temple said quietly. "A boy going on six years old."

Doc Adams frowned. "You are joking!"

"Going on six," Temple repeated, "and I'm not joking."

"But—but I only retired three years ago." Suddenly he looked hurt. "Did Jill go to another—"

Temple had placed a hand on the old man's arm. The fingers gripped tightly. "Doc, did you or did you not deliver Jill of a child above five years ago?"

"I wish I could say yes. Nothing would have delighted me more. But—"

He stopped talking. There was no one to talk to. Temple had rushed from the bank.

Temple walked all the way home, forgetting his car parked at the curb. What on earth was the meaning of this? Why had Jill gone to a new doctor? Or, more important, why had not she told him she was doing so? There was a reason, perhaps. There had to be a reason . . .

Jill and John, Jr. were in the park when Temple got home and the house was empty and quiet. Temple paced the floor of the living room for a while, then went upstairs, taking them two at a time, and began rummaging through the dresser drawers. He found nothing, but he kept on going—to some old boxes in the closet on a high shelf; then to the attic and into some old trunks. He did not know what he was looking for, but while he dug through old papers and what not, he sincerely hoped he would not find it.

This hope was dashed. He did find it . . .

When Jill got home, Temple was standing in front of the picture window in the living

room, his back to the pane, his face in the partial shadow. Jill said, "Oh—darling. You startled me. We didn't expect you home. Your business didn't take long?"

"Not very long."

"We had a nice walk in the park. How would you like some sandwiches, you two?"

"None for me," Temple said.

It was the tone that arrested her rather than the words. She looked closer at him and said, "Is something wrong, dear?"

"I met Doctor Adams today."

Jill's eyes widened. Her face whitened. "Doc—Doctor Adams! Why, I thought he went to—"

"Went away? Yes, he did. That was a part of your plan —your deception, wasn't it, Jill?"

She hesitated as John, Jr. looked at them, puzzled. He asked, "What's wrong, Dad?"

For the first time since his return to the States, Temple looked at his son coldly. "Be quiet." He turned to Jill. "I came home expecting to ask why you'd changed doctors without telling me. That would no doubt have given you a chance to think up a quick lie. But that won't be necessary. While I was waiting for you, I went upstairs and hunted around and found this."

He held forth a folded sheet of paper. Jill took it with a numb hand. She knew what was written on it, but she read it anyhow:

WELLMAN BIOLOGICAL
LABORATORY AND CLINIC
Debit to:
Mrs. John Temple
One android — formed and incubated for three-month period. (Male.)
$678.50.

John, Jr. was peering at the bill from where he stood. He asked, "What is it, Mom?"

Temple answered the boy savagely. "It's something that proves you aren't my son! That you aren't even a human being! That you're a monster!"

Jill's face went dead white. For a moment, her eyes were terrible. Then she stepped close to Temple and slapped him across the mouth. She stood for a moment, striving to speak, then said, "I guess neither of us had better say any more until we can think sanely." With that, she took John, Jr. by the hand and went upstairs.

Temple dropped to the lounge and sat staring at the

floor. The room seemed to go around and around. Finally, it steadied down, but his mind was still a chaos. But his brain was too numb from the horror to think clearly. He sat and stared . . .

He looked up and saw Jill standing in front of him. She had her hat and coat on and she set a hurriedly-packed bag on the floor. She said, "I'll try to explain it as best I can, then John and I will leave."

"Explain—?" he said dully.

"I loved you so very, very much. I felt terribly guilty at not being able to give you a son. Then a doctor—not Doc Adams—told me of this place —about this scientist who had actually created human life—"

"The bill states, *android*," Temple said.

"A term that must be used. Some kind of a legal point. But John is as human as I am—as human as you are. I've watched him—loved him. He's as much my son as though I'd born him from my own flesh. He was as much your son, too, until you read that miserable piece of paper. Does it make so much difference? Hasn't he proven himself? Can you honestly say—?" She saw Temple's face and had her answer and gave it up. "I'm sorry I slapped you, John. For a moment I was not myself. It seemed such a cruel, brutal thing you did—"

"Does he know—what he is?"

"No—but now I'll have to tell him. He's too intelligent to pass this off without knowing why—without getting the truth."

There was a pause, an empty moment neither of them could fill. Then Jill said, "We'll leave now. I think it's best."

He said nothing.

She moved toward the door, stopped and turned halfway out, said, "I'm sorry, John— and glad. Sorry for you—and for what I've apparently done to you. Glad for myself, because I have a son, whether you have or not."

After a while, he realized he was alone. He sat for a long time and then went to the kitchen and got a full bottle of bourbon and a glass. Two hours later the bottle was empty and Temple was stretched out in a drunken sleep.

He got himself reasonably straightened out after a week of drinking and raised his eyes to survey his bleak new world. There didn't seem to

be much in it. All the foundations knocked from under him in one brief hour. He discovered, through the bank, where Jill had gone, and arranged that she be given all the money she needed. Then he began filling in his time. He thought of going back to work, getting another contract, but kept putting it off until tomorrow. He drifted into a fast crowd and played the races quite a little and—probably because he did not care much one way or the other—won quite a lot of money. He played golf and met beautiful and willing girls, but they lacked something. He became an expert bridge player and spent long hours over the tables with other addicts. Yet they always sensed that he was not an addict and could have gotten up and walked away any time he fancied, even though he played as intensely as they.

A month after the separation, he got a letter from Jill saying that whenever he wanted a divorce to go right ahead. She would sign any necessary papers and not stand in his way. He thought that divorce was probably the logical step, but never quite got around to it. He kept the letter—the only one she ever sent—and reread it on an average of once a month. At times, he vaguely wondered what the boy was doing—what Jill was doing.

Three years passed; three aimless, drifting years for Temple; years empty of emotion. The letter was pretty badly creased by now. Each time he had to take it from his wallet very carefully.

There was a yearning in his heart, but a rather nameless one because he refused to give it definition. If he thought even vaguely of getting in touch with Jill, he stifled the thought immediately.

At Christmas time of the third year he was walking down a snowy street when he turned suddenly into a store and walked through the aisles until he stopped and pointed to a very fine set of chessmen. "Those," he said to the clerk. "I'd like them wrapped as a gift. I'll write a card."

Shortly after the new year, he received a thank you note:

> Dear Sir:
>
> I appreciate very much, your thoughtfulness in sending me the beautiful set of chessmen. Mother and I played several games with them during Christmas vaca-

tion. I am taking them back to school with me and know I will enjoy them through the year. I am attending Carol Hill School for Boys and like it very much. Thanks again.

Sincerely,
John Temple

Temple's eyes softened, but only a trifle, as he read the note. Let's see—he'd be going on nine now—or was it ten. The years flew so fast. Temple put the note away and hurried off to a poker session . . .

Six weeks later, he got home from a casually pleasant evening with a lacquered blonde and snapped on the radio for the late news as he crawled into bed. The report was already in progress:

"—and the Carol School fire was marked by the heroism of one boy in particular, a lad named John Temple. Not only did he keep order in his wing and avert certain panic, but he rescued two classmates after the stairway had fallen, although he was badly burned in the process. He is at Mount Hope Hospital in a critical condition—"

Temple did not stop to think. He reacted. He was out of the house and rolling his car out of the garage in less than five minutes . . .

Jill sat in the small room into which they ushered him. She was very pale and looked much older, but was still very pretty. There were no formalities, no greetings, nothing to mark the years since they had seen one another. Temple walked over and stood in front of her and she said, "He was badly burned. They think he will die." She spoke through a cloud of dulling shock.

"He can't die," Temple said. "Are we allowed to see him?"

"They are changing his bed sheet—"

At that moment a nurse look in and nodded and Jill got up and followed her out of the waiting room and into a room across the hall. Temple followed his wife.

The boy lay naked on a bed, his body covered with some sort of transparent ointment. Temple saw the horrible burns and shuddered. He walked to the bed.

John, Jr. was awake, his eyes solemn and weary. He could or could not have been in pain. His face gave no indication.

Temple strove for words to express the pitching emotions

within himself. "It—it was a heroic thing you did—and I know——"

The boy smiled. "Perhaps, but if it was a matter of who had to die, sir, it is better that—the human ones—go on living."

In one brief instant, Temple castigated himself to such a depth that he would feel the agony for a long time. "Son—son—"

He thought he saw a sudden brightness in the eyes, but at that moment a nurse entered, carrying a bottle of blood plasma and Temple suddenly turned on her and pushed her from the room. In the hallway, while she looked at him in mild fright, he said, "The doctor! Where is he? I must see the doctor! I must see him now!"

The doctor was not far away and came quickly, and Temple told him what he wanted. Temple said, "It's important, Doctor—you've no idea just how extremely important!"

The doctor considered. "An antique method, but I suppose we can manage it. You'll have to have a blood-type test first, of course."

A few minutes later a cot was wheeled into the room. Temple followed it, stripping off his coat and shirt. He climbed on the cot and smiled across at John, Jr. He held out his arm and they punctured it as the first step in an old-fashioned blood transfusion.

As the blood began to flow, he said, "Chin up, son. Everything is going to be all right."

The boy smiled. "I—I think I'm going to come through this—Dad."

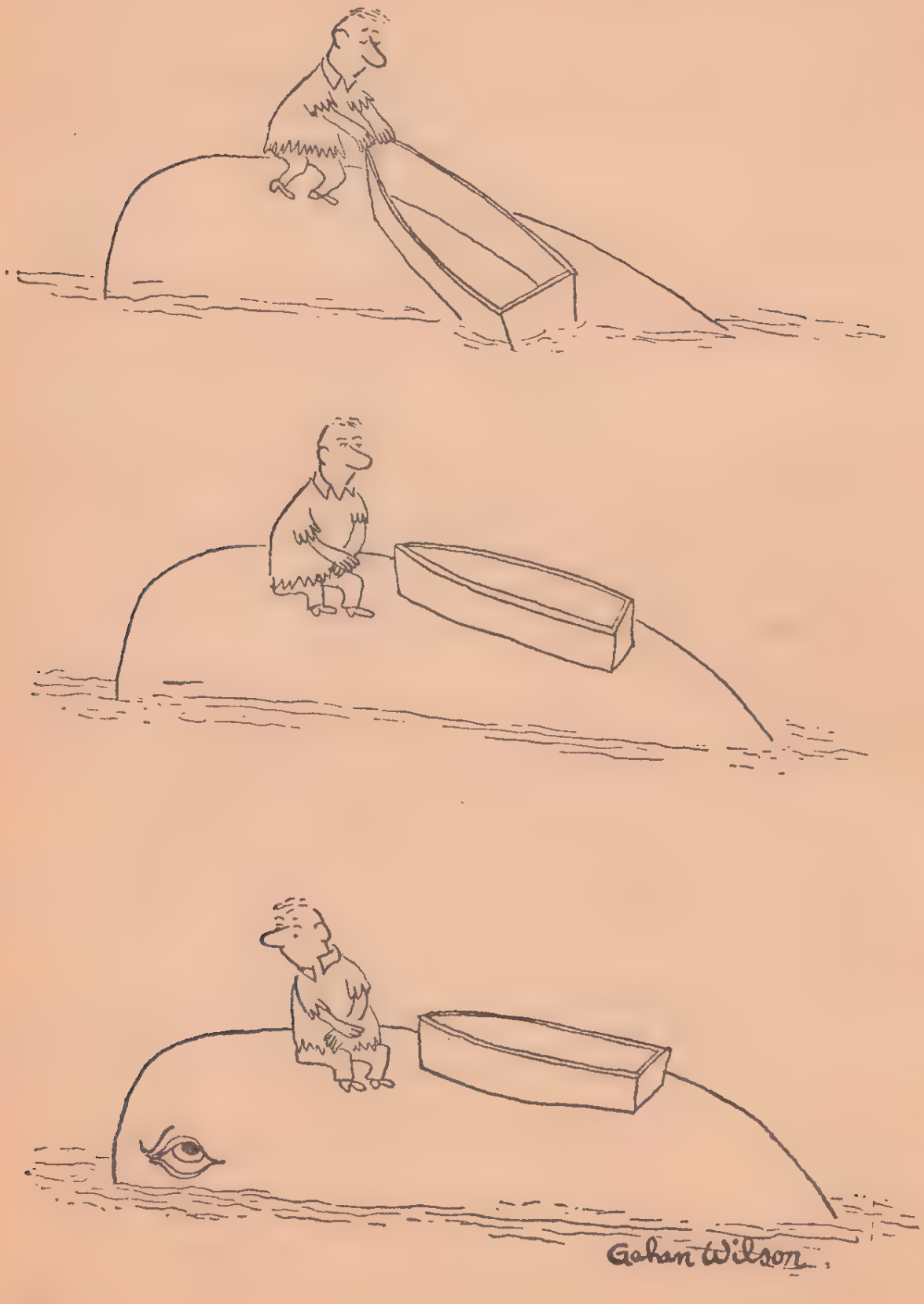
"You're damned right you are. A little thing like a fire can't stop my boy!" He looked up at Jill and reached out for her hand. It was there waiting. "No sir! Can't stop *our* boy. Why, the three of us together are practically unbeatable!"

Then he looked and saw that John, Jr.'s eyes were closed. He was smiling in quiet, relaxed sleep.

Very gently, Temple pulled Jill down and kissed her.

THE END

THE CASTAWAY . . .



ACCORDING TO YOU...

BY THE READERS

Dear Editor:

First thing off, I think the readers' section should stay. Especially since *Fantastic's* and *Amazing's* are the best. Of course, much of this is because of the better-looking magazines, including the sections in a single column of type, but some credit goes to their just being slightly better, though different, in content.

Here are some comments on the letters. I agree that the short feature should come back. Your first editorial in the June issue was a real improvement. I agree that the longer stories should be printed. And I not only like—I love—stories about the Cro-Magnons and Egyptians. And if *Amazing* is returning to space-opera, good!

Why not ask the letter writers to send in their exact rating, then tabulate them and slip them into the issue? One line of magazines does it, but they don't have the idea copyrighted.

Lawrence Shovlin
11760 Kilbourne
Detroit 13, Mich.

• *We can't run short features because there simply isn't enough room—unless readers would be willing to sacrifice some of the story material, which we very much doubt. And since you also want longer stories . . . well, paradoxes are always difficult to handle! . . . We'll keep an eye out for*

good *fiction about cave-men and past civilizations . . . If there are enough letters rating the stories to give a clear picture, we'll print the most representative one.*—ED.

Dear Editor:

Just a short note to express a little appreciation. Primarily of Beecham's illustration for "The Killer Within," in the June *Fantastic*. It has been a long time since I've had the pleasure of seeing a pen-and-ink drawing of a girl who looked like a human being. Mostly, they seem to be poured out of a mold . . . all leggy, full breasted and schematically beautiful. For instance, most of Finlay's girls look like all the rest, if you see what I mean. This girl of Beecham's, however, looked like flesh and blood for a change. My congratulations, both to you and to Beecham.

My other bouquet is for the latest *Amazing*. I'd about given it up as a lost cause, but for some reason I was attracted to this latest issue. Sorry to say the stories were humdrum, run-of-the-mill things, but it's been a long time since I saw an interior format which pleased me as much. Pick up the story quality (yeah, just like that!) and you've a constant reader.

Anthony Van Riper
Box 567
Vineyard Haven, Mass.

• *Your editors felt the same satisfaction you've expressed, Mr. Van Riper, when Beecham brought in that illustration. A lot of readers reacted as favorably, and when this was mentioned to the artist—along with the reasonable request that he match the quality in future work—he looked at us blankly and muttered something about* all *his drawings being the best in the field. He could be right. . . .* —ED.

Dear Editor:

Have just finished the June issue of *Fantastic* and could hardly wait to ask what happened.

I have been reading both *Fantastic* and *Amazing* for twelve years and never have I found a complete issue without even one good story.

This whole issue seemed completely lacking in the qualities of your past presentations. Usually I have difficulty in putting

down the magazine until I have gone through it, practically comma by comma. This time, however, I literally fell asleep over it.

I hope your future issues will be up to your usual fine high standards.

Lee Hover
473 Grand Avenue
Leonia, New Jersey

• We *don't know what happened. Maybe you just happened to be sleepy. From where we sit, the stories seem exciting and diversified enough for the satisfaction of most of our readers. Anyway, better luck next time.* —ED.

Dear Editor:

"Beyond the Black Horizon" was one of the best stories I've ever read and the best *Fantastic* has ever presented, although Paul W. Fairman is trying to be a Jorgensen—and can't. It's impossible to do the impossible.

"The Rusted Jungle" was a masterpiece. Or does anybody care to dispute it?

James W. Ayers
609 First Street
Attalla, Alabama

• *So, who's arguing?* —ED.

Dear Editor:

Just got my new *Fantastic* and couldn't resist putting in my two cents after reading the letters page. I hope some of you would-be critics see this.

I'm mightily annoyed by some of the boys who look for every little detail to prove incorrect instead of simply reading the stories for enjoyment. Frankly, I don't care if "The Vicar from Skeleton Cove" wasn't so authentic; I enjoyed the story very much and that's what matters.

Being a full-fledged fan of s-f writings, I'd like to congratulate *Fantastic* as being one of the finest, if not *the* finest, of magazines on the stands today. I think it would be great to start a Fantastic Science Fiction club. Obviously most of us have a collection of magazines and s-f anthologies. Why not

have a coast-to-coast club? If you other guys and gals are interested, I'd like to hear from you.

By the way, your artwork is improving a hundred percent —covers as well as interiors. Stories are as good as ever, but I'd like to see a Bradbury or Ray Chandler running around those pages every so often.

I hope the idea of a club clicks with at least a few of your readers.

Claudia Moholy-Nagy
81 Bedford Street
New York 14, N. Y.

• *No point in getting annoyed; an annoyed reader writes indignant letters, and then somebody writes an indignant letter about people who write indignant letters and then somebody else writes an indignant letter about people who write indignant letters about people who write . . . where were we? . . . . Bradbury and Chandler? So would we, lady—so would we!* —ED.

Dear Editor:

Many people think that some of the things that happen in science-fiction magazines and books are impossible. This may be true; however it is my contention that only the future will tell. One thing I cannot wait to find out about, though, is a most remarkable thing which appeared in your June issue in the story entitled, "The Killer Within." I would like to quote two passages which it contained:

1. "She was slipping a sweater on over her bra as we climbed into my souped-up Ford."
2. "This souped-up Pontiac of mine can do a hundred and thirty on the straightaway."

What I would like to know is, how did our hero, Craig Moran, get from the Ford to the Pontiac?

Howard Hiser
6246 Cortelyou
Cincinnati, Ohio

• *Well, you see, Mr. Hiser, it was like this . . . That is, well, you take a Ford . . . or a Pontiac . . . or maybe a Caddy. . . . What we mean is . . . well, it was a dark night and . . . Say,*

how'd you like "Beyond the Black Horizon"? We thought it one of Fairman's best. Butler's "Too Tough to Bury" was almost as good; you'll be getting more of his work in these pages. Nice hearing from you, and any time you have questions, don't hesitate to ask them. —ED.

Dear Editor:

I would like to congratulate you and your writers on a very good issue for April. I read every story, and there wasn't one that I didn't go for, especially those by Mr. Lesser, Mr. Wilson, and Mr. Thames. I have one small gripe, however: the illustrations were very misleading. The ones for "The Still Waters," "Killer in the Crib," and "Big Bluff," especially. In "Big Bluff" they were not playing cards when the Chavorians came; in "Killer in the Crib," I don't recall the baby pushing any buttons; and in "The Still Waters," Thane was wearing a thermo-suit, not like in the drawing.

That's the only gripe I have for this issue. Please put Mr. Lesser's stories in your magazine.

Jim Rogers
15022 Lamphere
Detroit 23, Mich.

• *Look, Jim, the purpose of an illustration is more than merely to act as a camera. Something of the essence of the story itself should be captured. For example, there* was *a card-playing scene in "Big Bluff"—showing it at the time the invaders arrived on scene gave the reader the feeling that the Earthmen were putting on an air of casual indifference to danger; in other words a bluff. Okay?* —ED.

Dear Editor:

I've just finished "Beyond the Black Horizon" and I'd like to know something: Is Fairman a pen-name for Jorgensen? The two styles seem the same. It was a fine story; that's for sure.

I liked the way you wrote your editorial. (It Seems to Me That:) and I hope you'll do another in the same manner. The art was fair. Beecham did the better illustrations. The cover was a good job of art.

I like mostly science stories, but I go for tales of the past

and I'd like to see some in your two magazines. I can't see where reader Ronald Frazier finds *Fantastic* any better than *Amazing*. The two magazines are so much alike that I can't understand where there's enough difference to say one is better than the other. *Amazing* does have more departments but that's the only difference. I'd like to see the same departments in *Fantastic*.

Dan Adkins
General Delivery
East Liverpool, Ohio

• *Answering your question, Dan, the factor of "style" alone is not always sufficient to identify a writer's work. . . . . As for the similarity between the two magazines, both feature the best stories obtainable for the tastes of the readers who buy them. . . . It seems to us unwise to duplicate in* Fantastic *such features as "The Revolving Fan" and "The Spectroscope," which appear regularly in* Amazing Stories. —ED.

Dear Editor:

I have read quite a few of your publications and enjoy every word of them. Especially the "Jonger" series. I've been wondering whether or not you could tell me where I could obtain all of the Jonger stories so far. I would appreciate it very much.

Hilary White
P. O. Box 22
Dorris, Calif.

• *Any reader want to give this guy a hand?* —ED.

Dear Editor:

I have been a science-fiction fan for over a year now, having been won over by Ray Bradbury's brilliant "Martian Chronicles." I firmly believe that s-f should hold an important part in American literature, but I am getting pretty fed up with the mountains of trash that are being poured on the stands, obliterating for the reading public all attempts such as yours to turn out intelligent science-fiction. Writers such as Bradbury can work their heads off creating masterpieces that would claim an important part in writing, but their work

never reaches the majority of readers. Instead they are exposed only to bug-eyed monsters chasing half-naked space women across the covers of cheap pulp magazines; or your hero and mine, Captain Video, rescuing the Universe from obliteration by a mad scientist in fifteen minutes each night, except week-ends. Things are going to remain in that unhappy state until more magazines like *Fantastic* and *Amazing* are published.

No one can agree more strongly than I that Ray Bradbury is not only the greatest s-f writer, past and present, but able to stand comparison with the literary greats of our age. However, I can not bring myself to agree with your statement in the June issue: namely, that he is the *only* truly gifted writer to come out of science fiction. Nor can anyone who has read Kris Neville's "Bettyann," or Kurt Vonnegut's "Player Piano," or Richard Matheson's "Born of Man and Woman," or Fredric Brown's "Space On My Hands"—I could go on for fifty minutes and waste a great deal of paper. Granted, Bradbury is at the top of the heap, but don't give him *all* the credit.

By the way, I have hunted through both pulps and slicks but I can't find a Bradbury story less than a year old. Has he stopped writing, or haven't I been on the ball? An answer will be appreciated.

Don Crinklaw
618 Fremont Street
Marshalltown, Iowa

• *In the August issue of* Fantastic, *we devoted the editorial to an explanation of our reasoning behind the remark concerning Bradbury—and on the chance that you may have read it by this time, we won't go into the subject here. The reason there's been a gap in his fiction writing lately, we are told, is that he's been doing the screenplay of John Huston's production of "Moby Dick." Put two talents like that on the Melville classic—and Huston and Bradbury should be buried to the hatband in Oscars.* —ED.

Dear Editor:

The June *Fantastic* was very good. "Black Horizon" was excellent; it would make a swell movie.

The other stories were entertaining, and "Low Man on the Asteroid" was a unique column.

As usual, the readers' columns were good, as I look forward to any magazine's readers' department. I think anyone can benefit from what other readers have to say.

Anyway, you have a very good magazine.

W. C. Brandt
Oakland 21
California

• *So far we've heard of no offers from Hollywood for "Black Horizon." Maybe next week. . . . Even if there's no benefit to be had from the Readers' Page, it can be entertaining.*—ED.

Dear Editor:

Re: latest *Fantastic* (June). Where are you people?

Where is my old friend *Fantastic Adventures?* "The King is dead; long live the whatever-it-is."

Dating from 1940, my recollection of the aforementioned magazine, up until about '51, was one of fondness. After straddling the sci-fi planes for a while, I dropped on this June issue again, out of friendship.

No friends!

You place Edgar Rice Burroughs among the incomparables, then, a few lines later, among the rest of your thought-jots, you spin his tombstone over. Burroughs' chief source of inspiration was dreaming. The statement about dream-amateurs was a bit assinine at the offset.

The rest of the magazine was even sketchier in mental content. All the stories, save "Too Tough to Bury," ended just where the real problem patterns ought to evolve into a complete plot.

Don't take me at a cross-purpose; I'm no high- or low-brow.

You stated in a letter reply that there was no market of any size worth catering to in the fantasy genre. *Good* fantasy always finds a responsive public.

Fantastic Adventures used to fall into the good fantasy categories. You people must be operating from a different dimension. Your magazine, as is, is not good anything.

You are a braggart and it is a shame that F. A. has fallen to a point where it needs to be boasted about.

What happened to *Shaver?* I'd like some honest comment on the whole Shaverian tragedy, from you and your readers.

Will Luther
22 East Parkway
Greenbelt, Md.

• *Edgar Rice Burroughs got his stories the way most pro writers get them: by careful plotting and hard work on a wide-awake level. So don't give us any of this "dream" malarkey. . . . The business about ending "where the real problem patterns ought to evolve into a complete plot" sounds like something swiped from a "You too can write!" con-game. . . . What happened to the Shaver material? What happened to the dinosaur?* —ED.

Dear Editor:

Here, for what they are worth, are some comments and opinions regarding *Fantastic.* To begin with, I rate it number four—after Astounding, Galaxy, and *Amazing Stories.* This opinion is based on some 36 years of reading this kind of fiction. Except for the Verne, Welles, *et al,* classics, the earliest remembrance I have of the genre is an occasional story in the old Argosy All Story magazine, beginning about 1919.

By this time I prefer, of course, what some are calling "adult" science fiction. Which means to me that the hero had better use a few brains to get out of a nasty situation instead of relying solely on his fists, a la Superman.

Regarding your comment on s-f to correspondent Guy E. Terwilleger, how would you distinguish between s-f and fantasy? It seems to me that s-f should have *some* element of science in it. For that reason I would classify "The Typewriter," by Allerton as pure fantasy. I think I would also include "For the Greater Good," by Costello in the fantasy classification, for I can't agree that the mental sciences have a leg to stand on yet, Dr. Rhine or no Dr. Rhine.

Your comments in "Low Man on the Asteroid" sure drew a lot of nods from me, but I would like to include Heinlein with Bradbury.

I like the readers' letters department and I thought the June cover was wonderful. The interior artwork is exceptionally good too, but shouldn't the illustrator be required to read

the story? For example, in "Black Horizon," where do those human-bodied catfish come in? You know an alien doesn't *have* to be a BEM to be impressive—horribly or otherwise. It takes a much better artist to do an almost-human than to draw a BEM.

Also: "Too Tough to Bury." Did you ever see pall-bearers lug an uncovered casket down the street? If we readers didn't have imaginations we wouldn't be reading this stuff.

One more thing: How do s-f readers go about increasing their numbers to the point where our best writing brains will be attracted to the field? I think that's up to you. I don't think you can get them from the biggest markets; i.e., the readers of trash fiction comic books, etc., and so it seems that the quality of the writing and the thinking therein must be raised so as to draw from the rest of the markets. It looks as though you are trying to do that, and I wish you luck.

Floyd W. Zwicky
2244 South 6th St.
Rockford, Illinois

• *First, we had our fling at "adult" science fiction—and went too far, ending up on the "rarefied" level. So we dropped back a few pegs—and learned that both adults and teen-agers were there to welcome us. Most everyone, regardless of numerical age, likes a good solid action story containing believable characters—and that's exactly what we have to offer. Second, you've pretty accurately defined the difference between science fiction and fantasy. "The Typewriter"* was *pure fantasy; "For the Greater Good" sort of fell between the two schools. Third, there are two schools of opinion on the type of artwork we use. We find that a majority of readers like illustrations to be recognizably out-of-this-world. So if the artist had covered the casket in "Too Tough to Bury," you'd have had four human pall-bearers carrying an ordinary casket through an everyday street. Fourth, the "best" writers will be attracted to s-f when payment rates in it come up to the other markets. To bring them up, enough readers must first buy the s-f magazines to justify such rates.* —ED.

Dear Editor:

I wish there was some way I could get back the money I

spent for my subscription to *Fantastic*. Not only because of the torn and mutilated condition of the last issue, either. When *Fantastic* first came out, it was composed of fantastic stories—rather gruesomely slanted toward crime and murder, but fantasy nevertheless. Now, however, it has degenerated into just another pulpzine, grinding out pseudo-science fiction in a nauseating drizzle of crud.

I note in your letter column that you are convinced that "where fantasy is concerned, too few readers like the genre to support a magazine devoted solely to it." Well, that's your opinion and you are entitled to it, but the fact remains that the readers who *do* like the genre never get a chance to show whether they would support one or not. They subscribe for what purports to be fantasy, only to discover too late that the editors used the word "fantasy" merely as a come-on so they could work up another outlet for their stf hack-writers.

You've turned the amusing *Fantastic* of the early issues into a cheap replica of that stinking crudzine *Amazing*, and those of us who subscribed to the former in the hopes of reading fantasy now find ourselves stuck with a magazine we can't do anything with but throw it in the garbage can. (I should have known better than to trust Howard Browne to continue turning out a quality product when he could make a faster buck on a crudzine instead.)

G. M. Carr
5319 Ballard Avenue
Seattle, Washington

• *Of all the ridiculous examples of reasoning we've come across in our time, the preceding wins the rectangular bowling ball. Why do you think we made the statement that there were too few readers to support a straight fantasy publication? Not because we couldn't think of anything else to say, but because we found it out beyond the shadow of doubt—and found it out the hard way! What d'ya mean: "readers who like (fantasy) never get a chance to . . . support one"? Nonsense! What about Unknown Worlds, or Beyond—as well as the early issues of* Fantastic *you mention? You think they were discontinued because too many readers were being maimed in the rush to buy copies? It would be just ducky, of course, if some dream-world publisher would put out a red-ink*

publication to keep you happy. But this happens to be a materialistic world and you might as well get used to the idea. And don't worry about not trusting this editor; you'll always know where he stands. Personally, we're fed up with the naiveté of people who regard the making of a profit as some kind of unmentionable perversion. —ED.

Dear Editor:

Maybe you don't know it, mister, but you write the best editorials in the business—and I don't mean just in s-f magazines, either. The one in the June issue (It Seems to Me That) : was as fresh and interesting as a good short story and I hope you'll give us others on the same order. Your answers to readers' letters are smart, sharp, and to the point—and you don't pull any punches when the occasion calls for it.

Maybe I don't like all the stories you print, but as long as your editor's page and editorial remarks keep their present level, I've got 35 cents a month to send your way.

Thomas Robertson
Lakewood, Minn.

• *Thank you.* —ED.

Dear Editor:

Let's watch it! I'm referring to your statement in the June issue of *Fantastic:* "You'll have no more reason to dislike our covers; they are now the best on the stands." Not that they aren't good; if they continue in the tradition of the April and June issues, they will be one of the best, only occasionally. But, as an old saying goes: "Self-conceit leads to self-destruction."

What happened? The issue of *Fantastic* I got had an extra section. Did some magazines have this missing?

I noticed that Finlay wasn't in this issue, neither was he in the May issue of *Amazing Stories.* Don't let your interior illustrations slide down after your brief pickup. Finlay helped them a lot. Who did the illustration for the Ron Butler story?

I'm glad one editor (namely you) had sense enough not to use small print just to get a few extra words in. The easier it is to read, the more enjoyable it is. This is one of the

reasons I don't buy several of the other promags; their stories are the other reasons.

I don't know about anyone else, but I liked "Beyond the Black Horizon."

I propose a toast to Dick Matheson, "the most under-rated writer"—and my favorite.

Anthony Zampetti
253 Snyder Street
Orange, New Jersey

Dear Editor:

I've been reading s-f for about four or five years now and read several copies of *Amazing* but somehow passed up *Fantastic* until now. What attracted me to your June issue was the terrific cover. The utter horror was increased by the adding of the buildings, of course; but if the main building is supposed to represent the Empire State Building, the other buildings would be under water, right?

Judging from the letters, I take it this is the new-style *Fantastic* with one of the new features being your column. All I can say about it (the column) is it certainly gives the writers the lowdown on how to crack you and make a sale. Not only do you give the type of material you detest most, but you give several examples of your favorite story, which with a few changes could be used again. . . . Enjoyed "Black Horizon" and "The Killer Within." Rest were rather poor. All in all, your magazine is pretty good, and I'll be a customer from now on.

Daryl A. Davy
210 Durham Street
New Westminster, B. C., Canada

• *About the cover, Daryl—more of that "artistic license" we've been screaming about lately. . . . So far, none of our writers have paid much attention to all the free hints we dropped into that editorial.* —ED.

To Floyd Zwicky of Rockford, Illinois, goes a matted illustration for the best letter this issue. (See announcement following this department in the August, '55 issue.) —ED.

WHAT NUMBER ARE YOU CALLING?

(Concluded from page 86)

"Oh, Jack, of course I'll marry you."

We kissed, but soon Doris came up for air and said, "About that clothing. I don't mean *my* clothing. I mean the extra set of clothing."

"Yeah," I said, remembering. "The extra set."

"It didn't belong to that second Doris. She was wearing her own."

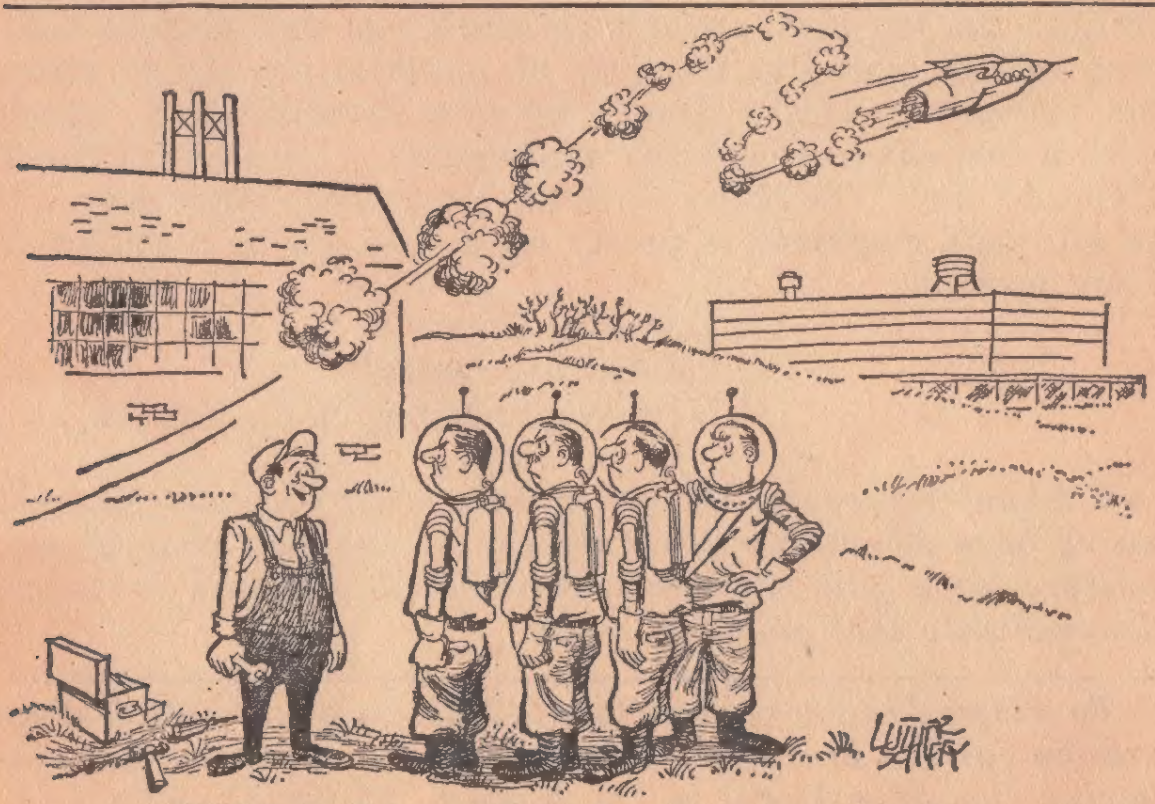
"Yeah."

"I don't understand it, Jack."

Me, I did and I didn't. If there were two interlocking worlds—why not three, or four, or five, or an infinity. All filled with Jacks and Dorises and duplicates of everybody. Maybe New York is called New Castille in one of them. Or New Paris. And maybe someday, via teleportation, we'll all be going to those places and finding out. Maybe it will be sooner than we think.

But I said to Doris, "Just forget about it."

You see, I was thinking about what was going to happen to the third Jack and Doris when the second Jack and Doris, our doubles in New Amsterdam, caught up with them. **THE END**



"Well, I got her going! Where were you guys?"

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continued from other side

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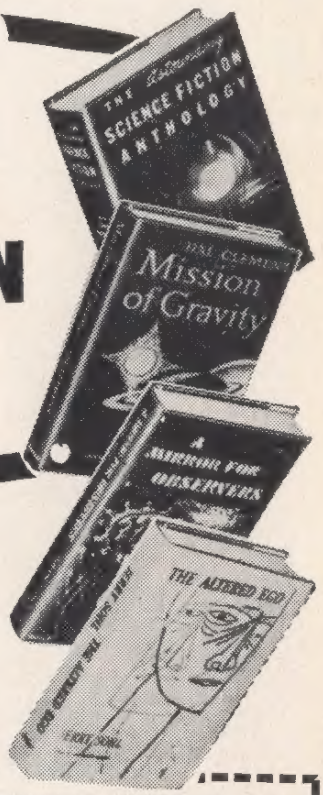

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